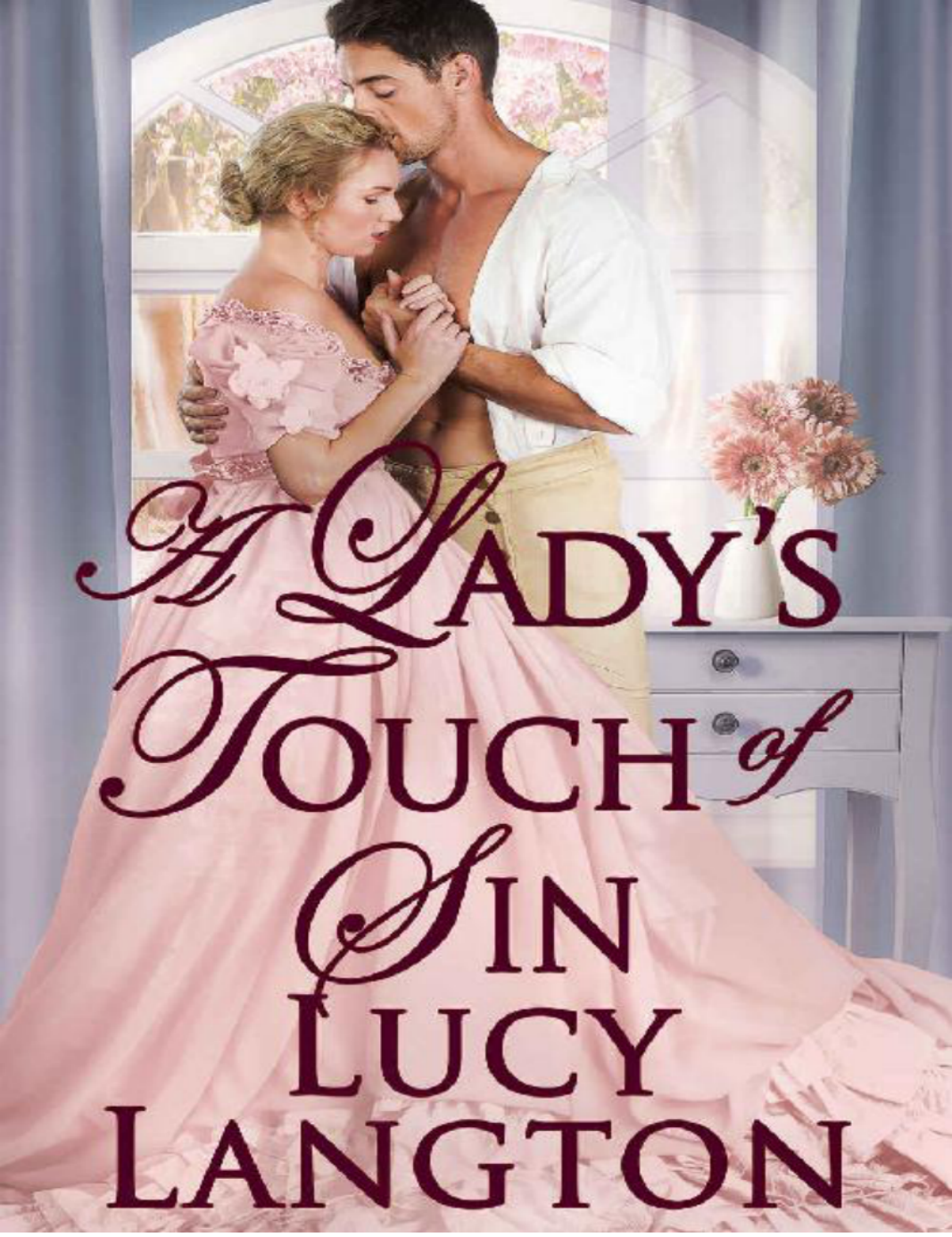

A Lady's Touch of Sin
Lucy Langton

A Lady's Touch of Sin

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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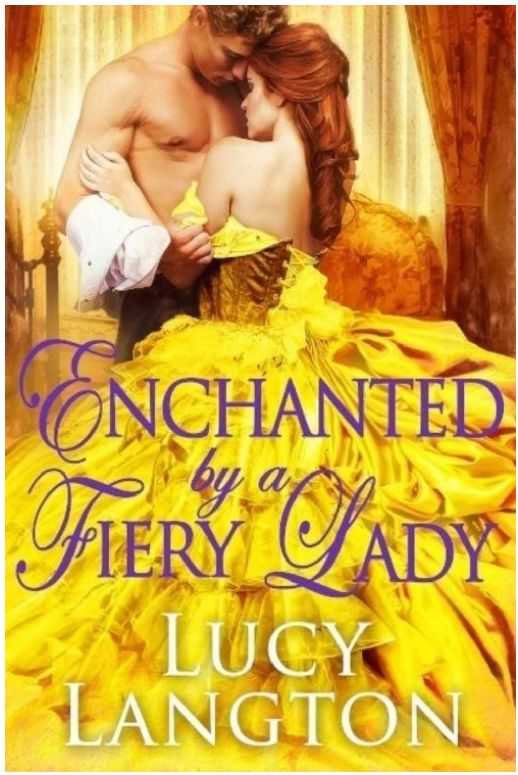
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A Lady's Touch of Sin

Introduction

When her mother finds out that she was involved in a frantic love triangle, Marta Schnitzler is instantly being cast from her Austrian home. What awaits her is her Aunt Margaret, a tittering woman with an earnest responsibility to find Marta a match, against her wishes. While the blue-eyed beauty desperately tries to escape from her future misery, a very dashing man shows up in her life, but, to her misfortune, he is not the one her Aunt has chosen for her. But when her Aunt insists so much on a particular engagement with a Duke, should she just give up to the tantalizing stranger she just met or should she fight to satisfy the burning passion she holds for him?

Baldwin Terrence is a successful businessman and the future heir to his ducal estate. When his best friend’s cousin comes unexpectedly to visit, he finds himself surprisingly stricken by her stunning eyes, and the connection between them is electrifying. Her beauty is irresistible and tests his willpower at every turn. She's everything Baldwin is not: a spitfire, compassionate, apt to dream and gossip and live loudly and grandly. Of course, she catches the eye of nearly every important member of society, including the dastardly Duke, Lewis Remington. The only thing he knows is that he is determined to possess her, at any cost. Will he convince her that the haven she’s longed for all her life may be lying in his arms?

Thus begins a tale of lust and heartache, full of passionate moments. But soon their burning promises are all they have left. Caught between her past and her future, Marta must decide whether she's willing to let go of the life she knew for a love she never thought she would find. But in the end, is the choice actually hers to make? Torn between her Aunt's will and what she desires, she has to choose between the man who sets her heart on fire and the one she despises. But can this undeniable desire between them really be buried? Will their love prove strong enough to shatter every obstacle in their way?

Chapter 1

Blonde-haired. Blue-eyed. A woman who'd grown up in the shadow of the gorgeous Alps, attuned to the layered and humble culture of the Austrians. She'd never been one to demand anything else. “In every way, you're an Austrian girl, aren't you?” was how her mother phrased it, with a twinge of doubt to her voice.

“You've raised me an Austrian girl,” Marta returned each time, genuinely fearful that her mother looked at her—her half-English, half-Austrian daughter, and considered her a mistake. Perhaps she longed for a full-fledged English daughter, a daughter with a better English accent, and a more proper approach to the concepts of courting and love.

Throughout the previous months, Marta had certainly proven herself to be much more like an Austrian girl than her mother wished for.

Marta Schnitzler was nearly 19 years old, which meant her mother, Evelyn Schnitzler, had journeyed to Austria to marry her father nearly 20 years before. Throughout those early years, Marta had lived a stunning, sun-speckled life. But there was always a strange shadow behind that life: the shadow of England, the country her mother had left behind and seemed to miss so desperately.

Throughout Marta's childhood, she'd demanded of her mother only twice: why had she left her beloved home? Her mother spoke of England with such poetry and nostalgia that it made even Marta's heart ache. Her mother had said something off-handed about her duty to Marta's father and left it at that. “It was a different time,” she said eternally, as though that was some sort of bandage over everything

else.

Marta had journeyed to England before age nineteen only a few times: at ages four, eight, and twelve. Now, as her mother verbalized to her that she would embark on a journey and remain in England throughout the next courting season, Marta was left only with the images of her twelve-year-old trip. She felt sure it had rained the entire time; the grey clouds above had pressed onto their heads in a formidable fashion, and the accents had been difficult to decipher from county to county, as they'd visited her mother's various friends and cousins. She glanced up at the gorgeous, white-capped Alps and felt a surging pain in her stomach.

"Mother. You can't think that I'll just leave my beautiful Austria all spring and summer long," she whispered. "You cannot rip me from something I hold so dear. All my friends and my…"

"Yes, your lovers," her mother said, a note of sarcasm in her voice. "Of course, I wish you to leave your lovers. You've created quite a mess of it all, darling Marta. I can see it on you. You're a shadow of your former self. Moping about the house, your heart aching." Her mother sniffed and lifted her chin, as though she sensed the power of her words and wanted to allow them to sting another moment more.

Tears collected in Marta's eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She, too, lifted her chin toward her darker-haired mother, a mother who looked very little like her. When they'd walked down the street together years prior, people had stopped them and asked their relation, as they didn't seem to be mother and daughter. This had cut Marta's mother to the core. "She's my daughter," she'd insisted, in broken German. "Through and through."

This was another factor that had altered their relationship over the previous few years. It seemed that Marta's mother could never master

the German language, no matter how often she studied. She'd grown increasingly disheartened about it. When they were in public, Marta ordinarily had to take over the conversation and speak for her mother, who grew aggressively red-faced and normally screeched at Marta afterwards. "I could have handled that myself."

But Marta had grown up speaking both languages. She felt both sides of her personality as two separate countries. And her mother had pinpointed the Austrian side as the reason for her adventurous nature, the reason she'd fallen into such a strange and sinister love-triangle.

Indeed, her heart felt as though it had been dropped deep underwater. It beat slowly, strained, aching and heavy from all the madness she'd created. It was all her fault. She knew that.

"An entire season in England will be good for you," her mother continued. They sat in the breakfast nook area with a full view of the mountains. She poured them both another spot of tea and rearranged the shortbread cookies atop the platter between them. The platter, to contrast the tea and English biscuits, had been painted in the Austrian fashion. Here it was, on full display: another contrast between England and Austria.

"Do you suppose?" Marta asked. She moved her biscuit across her plate, unsure if she'd ever be hungry again.

"I do. You remember my sister and her son, Ewan, don't you?"

"Aunt Margaret. Of course," Marta returned, remembering the finicky woman, approximately the same age as her mother, who'd insisted that she didn't run too swiftly with the boys through the forest and moors, as it wasn't "ladylike." At this, her mother had told her sister

that Marta ran around like a ruffian through Austrian hills. “It just chills me, wondering what sort of woman she’ll grow into,” she’d said.

These weren’t the sorts of things women like Marta could easily forget. She supposed that one never truly forgot the little, strange insults one’s mother cast toward them throughout their early youth. One’s mother was one’s very first audience—and if applause wasn’t heard, what sort of creature had one become?

“You’ve spoken with Aunt Margaret about this, then?” Marta asked. Her throat felt as though it might seal off, disallow her breath.

“Yes,” her mother returned. “She’s entirely thrilled with the idea. Already speaking about the sorts of matches she wishes to procure. She’s quite the meddling woman, of course—always has been. I remember when we were first courting, she had her finger in everyone’s business. If only I had listened to her when she’d told me who to link myself with, perhaps I wouldn’t…”

Here, she paused once more and drew her eyes again towards the biscuits. This seemed to be where the two of them chose to look throughout this strange and alienating conversation. Eye contact wasn't much of an option.

“Perhaps you wouldn’t have moved to Austria to be with Father? Perhaps you wouldn’t have had me?” Marta said, a hint of annoyance in her tone.

She’d felt the words flow from deep in the belly of her mother. She’d resisted them and now resisted asserting that those had been her thoughts. Her mother cleared her throat, shifted in her chair, and then blurted, “You’ll leave in three days’ time.”

This was far too sudden. Marta tore up from her chair and blinked at her mother, aghast. At nineteen years old, she could hardly envision travelling such a distance alone.

“You’ll take Laura with you,” her mother said then, as though this was enough of a gift.

“So, Laura must be forced to abandon her family and friends also?” Marta asked. She sizzled with volatility.

“You can tell her to remain here if you’d like to go on alone,” her mother said, sounding flippant, now. “It’s really up to you. I’ve informed her of the journey, and she seems rather pleased. Excited, even. The prospect of a new country, a new life… Why wouldn’t a young maid like that wish for adventure?”

Her mother placed a dry biscuit across her tongue and slowly chewed it, studying Marta’s face with beady eyes. Marta’s heart leapt into her throat and then floated back down again. She felt aching resentment for what her mother planned to do: rip her away from this wild situation she’d crafted.

But in truth, as minutes ticked on, she did recognise this as an opportunity to become something else, something better.

And, if nothing, talk of her departure would ripple through her Austrian town and make her sound even more exciting: certainly not the sort of woman you didn’t choose over another.

At this thought, she, too, dropped her eyes to the biscuits and chewed softly on her lower lip. “Three days to say goodbye to Austria,” she whispered, marveling at the thought.

“Make sure you say ‘auf Wiedersehen’ to as many of these chubby-cheeked Austrians as you can,” her mother said coldly, utilizing a wretched Austrian accent.

**

When Marta arrived back in her bedroom, she found her maid, Laura, awaiting her. In German, she cried, “Darling Marta! Your mother has informed me of the adventure we’re to embark upon.”

Oh, how dreadful that her mother could be correct about so many things. Marta curved her own smile between her cheeks and nodded. “I suppose it’s the sort of thing I can’t get out of now. Not with my Aunt Margaret lying in what for me, waiting endlessly to suit me up with some lacklustre Englishman.”

“Oh, but aren’t they endlessly attractive, the Englishmen?” Laura asked. She batted her eyelashes swiftly.

“Laura, I can’t imagine they’ll be anything too exciting. Aren’t they meant to be rather stuffy, rather boring?” Marta returned. She perched on the edge of her bed and gazed out again at the mountains, her heart surging with panic.

“I’m rather sick of Austrian men,” Laura returned. “Not that your mother has given me much time to myself for such matters.”

“I understand that,” Marta murmured, resolving herself to give Laura as much time as she required off to truly experience this strange “English” existence to its full potential.

“Oh, but I’m rather worried about my English,” Laura continued. “It’s entirely lacklustre, and I know it will get me into heaps of trouble.”

“Perhaps I can teach you a bit on the way,” Marta offered. “It’s a very long, very arduous journey. We’ll need something to keep our minds preoccupied.”

Laura chatted on for a long while about her suspicions of the way of life in England. Marta continued to gaze outside. Dread seemed to envelope her. When she finally cast her eyes back toward Laura, Laura placed her hand on her heart and swept toward Marta.

“Darling, I’ve known you for years and years, and I’ve never seen you looking so tremendously…”

“Oh, it’s just this heartache,” Marta stuttered. “Part of the reason my mother wishes to send me away. I feel as though everything I’ve ever known and loved, everything I’ve ever dreamed of, is about to be taken away from me.”

“You’ve looked so stricken over the past weeks,” Laura admitted. “I haven’t drudged up the courage to ask.”

“You must have heard the gossip about the market,” Marta said, her voice heavy. “I’m widely known as the loser in a love triangle; the woman left behind. I know my mother wishes to shield me from such wretched labelling. But in truth, I believe that heartache is so powerful that it will follow me across the continent, all the way to that tiny island she loves so dearly. I cannot understand it, Laura. If she loves England so much, why doesn’t she return? Her love for my father seems lacklustre in comparison.”

“Your mother, leave your father? She would never operate so outside the bounds of societal expectation,” Laura returned.

“I suppose. But why would she remain so miserable throughout the rest of her life?” Marta considered. “She looks at these beautiful mountains—these incredible gifts from God himself—and doesn’t feel a thing. I know it because I can see the coldness in her eyes. She sees this next step in my life, this journey to England, to be a necessary and mathematical one. She cannot fathom the depths of my soul.”

“But didn’t she come to Austria in the first place because of some sort of wild belief that your father was her dearest and only love?” Laura asked. She said it sneakily, as though she wanted to remind Marta of just how similar she and her mother truthfully were.

Of course, Marta yearned to reject this concept. She sniffed and said, “I really don’t need anything else from you today, lovely Laura. Please, take the rest of the time for yourself. I can begin to pack myself. I know it’s nothing an English girl would do, but it’s what I feel I must do to prepare myself.”

After Laura left, Marta lay back on her bed and felt her heart drum up a reckless beat in her chest. She felt her best-laid plans shrivel up and

die, right before her eyes. All the while, the man she'd fallen for, the man she'd given her heart to, was assuredly off with this other, beautiful, entirely-Austrian woman, a woman who'd beaten Marta in every single manner, in heart and soul and beauty.

Marta clutched the fabric of her bed's blanket hard so that her fingers lost their colour. She sighed, recognising the severity of her anger, and slowly unclenched.

England. It was to be a fresh life. The sort of one that would allow her to make up her story as she pleased. Just then, her story in Austria had been cut short.

But there would be other things. Other events. She was Marta Schnitzler, and she lived only within the bounds of her own adventurous reality. Regardless of her mother's "sentence," she would embark on this journey with her eyes open to the possibility of it.

Perhaps that was how she could best her mother: to prove to her that she didn't need anything but the wild imagination of her own mind.

Chapter 2

Three days later, Marta and Laura sat together in the coach en route to England. Laura seemed skittish as the coach embarked from the station in Vienna. She nearly glued her nose to the window to peer out and wave manically at her brother, who'd arrived with her to see her off. Marta had already bid adieu to her mother and father at their estate, which had left her little to do while Laura and her brother Max had carried on before the coach's arrival.

It devastated her to admit that she wished for the sort of love Max and Laura had between them. Her mother hadn't been able to have other children after her; there had been something wrong during the birth. Sometimes, Marta wondered if this was another reason that her mother demonised her. She wasn't only her Austrian baby; she was further the only one she'd been allowed to have.

Throughout the journey to England, the train passed through Germany, with its rolling green hills and beautiful lakes and The Black Forest. As they cut through the border, Laura looked, aghast, and said, "There's another country between Germany and England?"

At this, Marta laughed and said, "Of course! This is Belgium."

"Belgium," Laura murmured, rolling the name around on her tongue. "I can't imagine a more beautiful word."

"Nothing is more beautiful than the word Austria. We must remember that forever," Marta affirmed.

But Laura didn't seem as keen on keeping her roots close to her heart. Rather, throughout the coach ride, she threw herself completely into her English lessons: reciting various terms by heart as they ripped through Belgium and laughing at some of the other phrases Marta taught her, such as, "By the by," and, "Wouldn't you like to?" which, she said, sounded terribly ridiculous from a purely rhythmic perspective.

"You'll take to England in no time at all," Marta said, genuinely pleased at her ability to teach. It kept her mind off the love she left behind, off the mother who seemed to despise her, and off the future that stretched before her, one she felt she needed to carve out for herself.

Here on the coach, it was just her and Laura and various verbs and phrases and nouns, along with mounds of whatever coach food items they purchased, including various sweets and biscuits and little packets of cheese.

When they neared England itself, the clouds that had lived in Marta's memory of England brewed up overhead, thick and formidable. On instinct, Laura reached for her jacket and flung it around her shoulders. Enormous raindrops splattered across the window, and Laura again lurched toward it to peer at the bright green flatlands, the fields that seemed almost moss-like, the trees that told a far different story than the ones back in Austria. They seemed oddly sinister.

"What was it like when you came here years ago?" Laura asked. Her voice was a bit strained, as though she suddenly wished to collect as much information about her surroundings as possible before the coach gave birth to them in this strange land.

“It was a family visit, mostly,” Marta said, her brow furrowed. “I met with my cousin Ewan, who is a few years older than I. I suppose now he’d be about twenty-four? So a good five years older than I. The previous time, I was twelve, and he was seventeen. I tried to keep up with him and his dear friend—oh, what was his name?—in the surrounding woods. But it was clear that I was an outsider. My Aunt Margaret scolded me and then scolded my mother. I remember distinctly she asked my mother if she really let me run about so wildly back in Austria. My mother looked stricken. Yet again, I’d disappointed her.”

“You mustn’t think of it like that,” Laura said. Her eyes glowed with innocence. “She really loves you. She must just imagine the sort of life she might have had if she’d remained in England and feel a bit regretful of it…”

“Regretful of me, her only daughter,” Marta said. Her lower lip bobbed around a bit. “Well, in any case. I won’t see her for quite some time, will I? Perhaps the next time she sees me, she’ll know me as a proper English lady. The sort of woman she’d be glad to call her daughter.”

**

At the coach station, Aunt Margaret, Uncle Everett, and Ewan greeted them. It took a long moment, truthfully, for Marta to recognise their faces. After all, it had been seven years since her last visit.

“Darling!” Aunt Margaret called, the moment she reached the trio. She was much shorter than Marta remembered, with stooped shoulders and several chins and wild, greying hair. Of course, as she was quite wealthy, she’d dressed excellently for this trek to the coach station. “You look every bit the Austrian girl your mother said she’d raised.”

Marta wasn't entirely sure what sort of compliment that was, or if it could even be deemed as one. "Hello, Auntie," she said, surprising herself with how thick her English accent was in this sort of company. "Uncle Everett. And you must be Ewan." She flashed a large smile at her handsome, broad-shouldered cousin. "I suppose you don't remember me."

Ewan's grin widened. There was a big gap between his two front teeth, one Marta didn't remember from their youth. "Of course I remember you. Not everyone has a cousin from Austria. It's made me quite the talk of the county."

Aunt Margaret rolled her eyes. Her wrinkled hand clutched Marta's wrist as she said, "He's really wretched, Marta, I do hope you won't be overwhelmed with annoyance. You'll grow accustomed to him as the season goes on; I promise you." She then gave a funny wink, which warmed Marta through her belly and up through her heart.

The good-natured greeting gave Marta a small morsel of hope. Her smile stretched wider. Suddenly, she remembered herself.

"Oh, of course. Allow me to introduce my dear friend and handmaid, Laura Arbinger. She's been a marvellous help throughout the journey already."

"Good afternoon!" Aunt Margaret said, her voice falling into a bit of a screech.

There was a strange pause. A look of emptiness folded over Laura's

face.

“I’m terribly sorry. She doesn’t speak much English yet,” Marta said.

“Oh! Good afternoon!” Laura said suddenly, in English. Then, she turned swiftly back towards Marta and muttered in quick German, “I’m terribly sorry. I thought I would recognise English much quicker, but their accents are bizarre, aren’t they? Much different than yours.”

“That’s so pleasant to hear! I haven’t heard the German language in many years,” Uncle Everett said. It was difficult to tell if his words were layered with sarcasm.

Laura gave Marta another confused look. Marta forced her smile and said, “It’s been a terribly long journey. Do you think we could…”

“Of course,” Aunt Margaret blurted. “Silly us. Here. We’ve brought one of our stable hands to collect your suitcases. Jeffrey!”

A muscular man in his mid-30s leapt out from behind them and grabbed several suitcases, which one of the coach hands had set in a line behind Laura and Marta. Laura nearly leapt from her stance. This was surely the first time someone had actually waited on her, rather than the other way around.

**

Aunt Margaret, Uncle Everett, and cousin Ewan lived on a grand

estate approximately a half-hour outside Central London, a county that allowed for the snooty response that one was “from” London, without any of the inner-city chaos.

As they rode, Aunt Margaret explained what had befallen her eldest daughter, Tatiana. The memory of Tatiana was brief in Marta’s mind. She was perhaps twenty or twenty-one at the time of Marta’s most previous visit, which meant that she was now twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

“She married when she was twenty-three, which was altogether appropriate,” Aunt Margaret recited, speaking as though some people had suggested Tatiana had married a bit too late for their or society’s liking.

“Who did she marry?” Marta asked. This was the sort of thing her mother would have liked her to ask.

“She married an earl, in fact!” Aunt Margaret said, altogether pleased with the question. “It was one of the more beautiful weddings I’ve ever attended. She’s a petite little thing, our Tatiana, and her earl towered over her throughout the ceremony. Their courting was quite swift. I remember I matched them in May, and by August, the engagement was set.” She beamed at Marta.

“So you’re a bit of a matchmaker,” Marta said, remembering what her mother had said about the upcoming courting season.

“Oh, it’s just precisely what I dream to be,” Aunt Margaret said. She seemed to glow with excitement. “I already have such a strategy for you, my darling niece. The niece from Austria! With all the beauty of the east and the Alps, and all the culture of England. You’ll do very

nicely, I believe."

Marta didn't exactly enjoy this seeming comparison to things that were oft-traded, like cattle. But she forced her smile wider, reminding herself that this was her first day in a long string of days. She couldn't very well draw herself obstinately out of the gate.

Obstinate cattle, out of the gate. The thought of it made her chuckle.

"What's that, darling?" Aunt Margaret asked. Her eyebrow shot high on her forehead.

"Oh, nothing, Aunt Margaret. I'm simply pleased to be back in England. It's been far too long."

**

The carriage clucked along, through the picturesque village with its gorgeous old-world church, its steeple a bit crooked toward the sky, over cobblestones and mud roads and then all the way to the Thompson Estate, a place that rippled with Marta's memories. As she stepped from the carriage, she felt as though she floated through a dream she'd had continually over the years. Perhaps on cue, due to some sort of act by God himself, the clouds parted over the large stone mansion and cast sunlight across it. The golden light reflected off the windows and across Laura's gorgeous face. Laura looked as though she'd never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

"It's entirely different to the mansions in Austria," she said, her eyes like saucers. "I've never seen anything like it."

“What did she say?” Aunt Margaret asked.

“She really loves your mansion,” Marta said. “It’s quite different from back home in Austria.”

Aunt Margaret lifted her eyebrows. “My! I cannot imagine what it’s like. I’ve seen the occasional painting before, of course, but lately, the way your mother has described it in letters…” She shook her head, seemingly disinterested.

The stablehand carried their suitcases into the mansion ahead of them. At the door, a bald-headed butler pulled open the door and bowed low.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Welcome to the Thompson Estate.”

They stepped into the elaborate foyer, lined with gorgeous old-world paintings of Marta’s relatives and Uncle Everett’s, as well. Everyone in the paintings looked rather forlorn and aghast and sallow, as though they’d lived very hard lives and had only paused for a brief moment to have their paintings done. Again, Laura seemed incredulous at anyone opening the door for her. She leaned again towards Marta’s ear and muttered, “They must know that I’m a servant, correct?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re guests just now,” she returned.

“So much German in this house!” Aunt Margaret said. This time, it

seemed clear that she didn't welcome it.

This caused a memory to flicker up in Marta's mind. Years before, when she'd been a twelve-year-old visitor, her mother had forbidden her from speaking any German. This had been a bizarre time, as her mind flicked between English and German, and she wasn't always clear which word would fly from her mouth on-command. Her mother's watchful eyes and ears had caused her to snap her lips shut more than once, seconds before she uttered something auf Deutsch.

"Mother, they've only just arrived," Ewan said. His words were reproachful, as though he understood precisely the sort of pressure Marta was under. He gestured out toward the hallway, which seemed to lead back towards the garden outside. "The clouds have cleared. Would you like to meet in the garden after you freshen up? I imagine dinner will be served rather soon."

"We're terribly hungry," Marta said good-naturedly.

"Hungry," Laura repeated, in English.

"Let me show you to your rooms," the butler said, his voice booming.

"We'll meet you shortly," Marta said to Ewan, lending him a grateful smile. "Thank you."

Marta had been given a grand room with a corner window that echoed back a beautiful view of the sweeping moors and the thick forest and the little river that snaked through the trees. The light spread out across the bed in a way that seemed almost planned,

making the white of the top blanket almost blistering to look at. No, this bedroom didn't feature a view of her Alps—but it was certainly generous. The butler placed her suitcases near the bed and said, "Now, I will show your maid her quarters."

Laura disappeared with the butler. She cast back a frightened glance, but Marta spoke in German, "All will be well. Meet me in the garden in twenty minutes," and Laura gave a firm nod.

The moment Laura disappeared, however, Marta's heart sank into her belly. Exhaustion brimmed in every part of her body. She ached to slip beneath the covers of her brand-new, foreign bed and close her eyes for many, many hours.

But no. She was in England now. She had to play by the rules of this strange Auntie, a woman who seemed ill-suited to anything she didn't fully understand.

Marta wondered how well that would play out. She imagined it would be interesting, to say the least.

Chapter 3

Ewan hadn't allowed another answer. "Come. Greet my cousin. She'll have travelled all the way from Austria, and if I'm right about anything at all—I feel certain that she'll be fatigued of my mother by the time we arrive at the estate. Throughout tea and dinner, we'll require your assistance, so that she doesn't grow immediately anxious about the idea of many months here in England and escape for the coach at once."

Baldwin Terrence, who, admittedly, hadn't had a lick of fun throughout most of the winter and spring, had been hesitant. After all, he'd met Marta Schnitzler before, many years ago, when she'd last come for a visit from Austria. At the time, she'd been nothing more than a twelve-year-old girl with a very strange accent when she spoke English. According to her, at the time, she hadn't yet wrapped her head around how to speak precisely like Englishmen and Englishwomen. A slight twinge of her German language poked itself through her syllables. It had been clear at the time that this had bothered her mother, who'd hired a dictation teacher throughout her stay in England.

Baldwin wasn't sure why he remembered this fact. When he met the Austrian-English girl, she was bright-eyed and blonde and volatile and alive, but she was also twelve years old. She'd struggled to keep up with him and Ewan, demanding of her Aunt Margaret to allow her to remain in the woods with them. At this, Aunt Margaret had dismissed her as a sort of ragamuffin child.

"She's much older now," Ewan had told him, amid this attempt to persuade him over to his estate for dinner. "Aren't you curious how different she'll be? All those years away from England, with only the flicker of English knowledge from her uptight mother. It's up to us to

show her what England really is about. We have to protect her, also, from my wretched mother. She wants nothing more than to link Marta up with some Englishman with a proper title."

Baldwin admitted to himself that he hadn't other plans and might as well attend this dinner function—out of curiosity alone. The heir of a ducal estate, he was six feet three inches tall, broad of shoulder and muscular from his long rides on horseback and his hunting sessions. He was occasionally stoic, eternally honourable, according to many, and had long black curls that swarmed around his ears and grew tousled when he rode too quickly. He'd frequently heard himself described as, "Incredibly handsome, but altogether too serious." "Has the man ever laughed at anything?"

In truth, Baldwin had a great deal on his shoulders. Throughout the previous years, his father had grown quite ill, which had required Baldwin to take over many of his duties. Ewan normally said that this made Baldwin respectable, far more than many other men of their age.

But Baldwin couldn't comprehend a world in which this sort of behavior would attract an ideal mate.

Not that he considered that frequently. He hadn't much time or energy for the act of courting. At twenty-five, he further didn't yearn for that sort of frivolous activity. Not any longer.

When he reached the Thompson Estate, he slipped off horseback and led the horse to the stablehand. He turned towards the mansion itself and let out a long sigh. The stablehand hurried back out from the stables and said, "I brought in her bags, My Lord."

Baldwin gave him an incredulous look. “To whom do you refer?”

The stablehand took a few delicate steps towards the mansion. “You must know. They’ve a new guest. The woman from Austria.”

“Ah, but she’s just a girl,” Baldwin said. He let out a soft laugh and ruffled his black curls.

“She seems to be really something, My Lord,” the stablehand said. “And her maid, she doesn’t speak a single word of English! I don’t suppose I’ve ever met anyone from a different country before.”

Baldwin kept up his incredulous expression. “I imagine they’re quite tired,” he said, genuinely unclear on why the stable hand had decided to lend his opinion of the guests to Baldwin himself.

When he reached the front door, the butler opened it, bowed, and sent him on his way down the familiar shadowy hallway, past the study and the dining room and the perpendicular hall, which led east towards the ballroom. Baldwin couldn’t remember a time in his life when he didn’t know the ins and outs of the Thompson Estate. At one point, Ewan’s mother and his had been the closest of friends. This had led to countless garden rituals, two little boys playing near the flowers as the women gossiped and spoke about their husbands. As the boys had grown older, their mothers had slowly separated. Baldwin’s mother had had another child, a little girl, and Aunt Margaret had felt the weight of two vibrant Thompsons, her eldest daughter, and her younger son. Beyond that, Baldwin had always suspected that the two women simply didn’t have much in common and had slowly inched themselves apart.

The boys had remained lifelong friends, of course. Ewan was the

closest thing Baldwin had to a brother. He'd spent countless sun-drenched afternoons at the estate, riding off into the distance with Ewan on the horse just behind.

Baldwin surged through the back garden gate just as the small group broke into fits of giggles. All of them turned towards the brunette girl, sharp-nosed and round-cheeked and beautiful, who now cast her eyes to the ground and seemed genuinely displeased with herself.

"Darling, that's not how you say it," Aunt Margaret said. She seized again with laughter.

The woman beside the embarrassed brunette leaned towardsher and whispered something in her ear, something Baldwin couldn't comprehend. He forced his eyebrows low and listened to the strange syllables bumping through a bizarre rhythm. When she finished, the other woman turned and generated a false, yet still beautiful smile.

"Aunt Margaret, please remember. She's only just learned bits and pieces of English over the previous few days of travel. Let's be patient with her, shall we? I imagine she'll get the hang of things as she remains on with you."

So this. This was the famous Marta Schnitzler.

Beauty was the first word that came to mind, but it didn't cover everything. Nay, it seemed to encapsulate just a smudge of her glittering blue eyes, her beautiful porcelain cheeks, her long arms and legs, her thin waist. She spoke sweetly towards her Aunt Margaret, but she did it with an air of danger: as though if Aunt Margaret stepped in the wrong direction once more, she might utilize far different words to explain how she really felt.

Baldwin now understood why the stablehand felt he needed to step out from the shadows and explain about the newcomer to the mansion.

This was certainly something else.

“Very well, dear,” Aunt Margaret said. Her words were flippant, a tone Baldwin was quite familiar with. She swung around suddenly, her eyes enormous, and spread her arm towards him. “I see our dear friend Baldwin has arrived! Handsome Baldwin, won’t you sit with us? I believe dinner will soon be served. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Famished, Aunt Margaret,” Baldwin said. Margaret wasn’t truly his aunt, but she was the closest thing he had to such a relation as his parents no longer had siblings. He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. For all her bad behaviour, he truly did love her. He had to. Too much of his life had been spent there at the Thompson Estate.

“Very good, Baldwin. I know you’ve met my favourite niece in the world before, but that was quite some time ago. I can hardly remember exactly…” She furrowed her brow and made that little flap beneath her chin shake.

“She was twelve, Mother,” Ewan interrupted.

“Is that right?” Aunt Margaret demanded. She cast her eyes towards Marta. “You must not remember anything about England! Darling, this is Baldwin. Baldwin Terrence.”

“I have a bit of memory of you,” Marta said. She scrunched her nose slightly and added, “Terribly sorry it’s not more.”

“I dare say you’ve had an entire life since then,” Baldwin said. His voice boomed delightfully, powerfully. Perhaps it could have been perceived to be flirtatious in nature, although he couldn’t be sure. It had been such a long time since any such thing had left his lips.

“Perhaps. Although from here, it’s rather difficult to remember it,” Marta said. A flicker of sadness shot up behind her eyes. In a moment, it disappeared—but not before it activated Baldwin’s curiosity. Ewan hadn’t yet given him the full story regarding his cousin’s reason for spending the season in England.

After growing up, living an entire life in one’s home country, Baldwin imagined it to be quite difficult to be so far from home, thrust into a society and its bizarre courting rituals without much preparation. Of course, this was all based on his own particular, narrow perception. Perhaps she didn’t think this way at all.

“Oh, but I know the three of you will have such a splendid time together,” Aunt Margaret said, whipping her palms together and giggling excitedly.

“Baldwin, what sort of events are upcoming?” Marta asked, her eyelashes fluttering. “I imagine you’ve quite a stacked calendar.”

To the side, Ewan scoffed. Marta turned her head swiftly as Ewan said, “Baldwin isn’t necessarily one for the nightly parties.”

This was, unfortunately, rather true. Baldwin felt a shadow fall over him at this reflection of his true self. Marta's cheeks fell slightly, as though she'd seen him fully for the first time.

"Baldwin has had quite a time as of late," Aunt Margaret said, seemingly wanting to patch up this strange turmoil Ewan had crafted. "He's taken over a great deal for his father. A more responsible man, I've never known in my life. Ewan, you would do much better to act a great deal more like your dear friend."

Ewan winked Baldwin's way. Secretly, Ewan treasured these moments: when his mother chastised him and built Baldwin up. To Baldwin, Ewan had always said, "You're the son that she always truly wanted. At least she gets you in this fashion." Truthfully, Baldwin's sober nature had taken a bit of the pressure off of Ewan.

Minutes later, the maid arrived to announce that dinner had been prepared. Aunt Margaret beamed at everyone and suggested that they sojourn to the dining room. Seconds after, the other young maid seated next to Marta leaned towards her and whispered something in German. Marta returned something else in German, and the maid looked a bit relieved. Baldwin burned to know what they'd said. It was as though they had a secret correspondence, a secret code.

As they walked towards the dining area, Ewan slipped in beside Baldwin. Still, Marta and the maid spoke in hushed whispers, several feet behind.

"What was the young maid's name again?" Baldwin asked Ewan under his breath.

“I believe it’s Laura,” Ewan returned. “Doesn’t speak a word of English. I feel a bit strange about my mother’s reaction to the language. She acts as though it’s some sort of attack on our way of life.”

Baldwin chuckled. He again glanced back at the beautiful Marta, who, at that very moment, erupted into gorgeous laughter at something Laura had said. He whipped his head back around once more and kept his eyes forward. Of course, Ewan had seen the entire show.

“You fancy her, don’t you?” Ewan asked. He clucked his tongue and lent an evil smile.

“Not at all. I just think it’s quite curious to arrive from such a distance for a season. Don’t they have the same sort of affairs in Austria? Wouldn’t she feel far more comfortable with an Austrian man?” Baldwin asked.

“I believe her mother is something of a difficult creature. Not so hard to imagine, as my mother is very much that, as well. Perhaps it runs in the family.”

“Well, I am of the strong belief that you’re something of a wild man yourself,” Baldwin returned. “The family lineage, I can see it etched in each of your stories.”

Ewan gave a good-natured chuckle. “I will dig a bit deeper into the reasons why Marta was asked to come to England. I’m sure there’s a good story there. I’ve heard she’s a bit rambunctious, precocious even —and entirely adventurous. The sort of woman you should really stay away from, old boy, lest she runs circles around you and makes you

dizzy."

Baldwin rolled his eyes. Ewan was the only man on Earth he would allow to tease him like this. If any other man so much as crossed him, Baldwin immediately asserted his education and his dominance and his whip-smart tongue.

But Ewan, no. He was too much like a brother. Everything he said was shrouded with earnest love and endless fondness.

Once at the dinner table, Ewan's father collected his wine glass, rose, and clinked it with a fork. "I'd love to make a toast to our new guests. Marta and her companion, Laura. Thank you for blessing us with your presence. And all the luck to you, dear Marta, as you adjust to the strange and beautiful world of England once more. I know your mother would be very proud."

Throughout dinner, Laura, the maid, kept her chin towards her chest. She flicked through her meal with a fork, seemingly uninterested. Amid pleasant conversation, Aunt Margaret blurted, "Darling, is there something wrong with the food?"

Laura didn't lift her head. Marta's eyes flickered dangerously. Baldwin was reminded of what Ewan had said about her precocious personality.

"Auntie Margaret, she doesn't speak English. It's going to be rather difficult to ask her questions for the time being," Marta said. She kept her voice light, although it was clear that she was prepared to dip into whatever tone suited the situation best. Annoyance seemed on the horizon.

“Terribly sorry. Silly me. I just keep forgetting,” Aunt Margaret said, her voice heavy with a sigh.

It really was as though Aunt Margaret had never gone through such hardship in her life. Baldwin made a mental note to chuckle more about this later with Ewan. It was all quite mesmerising to watch.

“Won’t you ask her if something’s wrong with the food, then?” Aunt Margaret asked.

Marta heaved a sigh. There it was: the annoyance. “The food is quite different than what we’re accustomed to, Aunt Margaret. I’ve had this sort of fare before, but it’s Laura’s first day on the island.”

“Oh, dear…” Aunt Margaret said. She clucked her tongue and brought her hands over her plate, hovering. She spoke much louder towards Laura, as though the loudness would do its part to connect their languages. “Darling, would you like me to have the cook prepare you something else?”

Marta sighed and turned back towards Laura. She spoke in perfect, articulate German—not that Baldwin would have any idea what that sounded like. In response, Laura looked absolutely shocked, miserable even, and shook her head wildly. It was clear that Aunt Margaret had embarrassed her a great deal. Baldwin felt annoyance, shame that they’d crafted such an environment for the poor girl.

Hurriedly, Laura returned words in German. In their wake, Marta said, “She says she’s felt a bit ill since our arrival. She doesn’t mean to be rude. Perhaps it would be better if she stepped back to her bedroom—

which she thanks you for yet again—and rests for the day ahead?"

Before Aunt Margaret had time to respond, Laura popped up from her chair and rushed for the doorway. At the exit, she paused, turned, and curtsied so perfectly and yet so swiftly that Baldwin nearly missed it. She then headed into the hallway and scurried out of sight.

"What a strange person," Aunt Margaret whispered towards her potatoes.

"What sort of food is she more accustomed to?" Baldwin heard himself ask.

At this, Marta's face appeared to brighten. She tilted her head, as though she hadn't expected anyone to take such interest. "She's rather fond of sauerkraut," she said.

"What sort of madness is that?" Aunt Margaret demanded.

"It's a fermented cabbage," Marta continued. "I really am fond of it, as well. And, oh goodness, in Austria, we're quite fond of schnitzel and beer and, goodness, have you ever had a strudel? It's a dessert from heaven above. I must admit, when I considered these next months in England, I didn't envision myself without strudel."

She spoke a bit too quickly, as though the ideas occurred to her and then rushed out of her mouth without pause.

“You must introduce us to the strudel, then,” Baldwin said. Again, he surprised himself. “I dare say this life of puddings and biscuits has me bored to tears. What a beautiful thing that you’re allowed a bit of both cultures.”

Marta seemed to look at him for the first time. Her eyes were enormous, glowing. “I sometimes can think of it that way. Other times, it seems just like an annoyance. What a wretched thing to think of it so negatively.”

These words wrapped themselves around Baldwin’s heart and squeezed hard. He sniffed and cast his eyes towards the plate, suddenly conscious that all eyes were upon him and only him. In the wake of this strange silence, Ewan cleared his throat and said, “Well, I do suppose my mother has a great number of plans for you, dear Marta. I hope you didn’t envision your life here to be all easy and free. You’re essentially a prisoner to my mother’s hopes and dreams.”

“And my mother’s, too,” Marta returned, grinning broadly.

“I suppose it’s nice for them, working conspiratorially across the continent as they have been,” Ewan said, chuckling.

“That’s enough,” Aunt Margaret said, although she kept her grin firmly planted. It was clear that this sort of arrangement was altogether true—and also, assuredly, that Aunt Margaret was pleased that she and her sister kept such close correspondence.

“It was a wretched thing for me when your mother left England,” Aunt Margaret said. “She was my dearest friend, my closest confidant. One day, I found myself preparing the flowers for her engagement party, gossiping away, and the next month—I found myself writing her a

letter to Austria, unsure if I'd ever see her again. It nearly broke my heart. Luckily, I filled in the gaps with my rambunctious and rather horrendous child, Ewan—and my much nicer, much more proper, once-girl, now-lady—darling Tatiana."

"I must see her soon," Marta said, dotting her napkin across her lips tenderly. "Two young children already is that so?"

"And Mother absolutely dotes on them," Ewan affirmed. "She cannot get enough."

"I imagine that they're the last grandchildren I'll ever have," Aunt Margaret said. "Unless, of course, Baldwin will allow me to share his children. They're bound to be such sober, such good little creatures. I will dote on them until the day I die."

"Mother, you've completely written me out of the concept of marriage and children, then?" Ewan said. His laughter boomed out across the table.

"Perhaps you'd find better luck in Austria?" Aunt Margaret said, her smile crooked.

"And now she's kicked me from the country!" Ewan said. "No one can imagine the sort of abuse I take in this house. As God is my witness…"

"Oh, shush," Aunt Margaret said, making everyone laugh.

Finally, goodwill swept over the table, crashing over them like a wave. Marta giggled incessantly, her drunkenness exacerbated only by the long journey she'd taken. Ewan's father told several stories about his recent trek to London, and Ewan interjected several times to tease Marta about her upcoming season.

Each time Ewan did this, Baldwin couldn't help sensing his cheeks grow red and blotchy. He prayed this was all in his imagination. But as he gazed at this beautiful creature, a woman he thanked God above he'd come to greet, he wouldn't help envisioninga time with both of them seated alone, sharing stories—her voice lilting with the occasional reveal of her Austrian accent. His arms felt heavy with this sudden bout of want. In years, he hadn't found himself privy to such an emotion. It felt rather dangerous and slippery in his hands—as though if he wasn't careful, it could crash to the ground and shatter.

It didn't matter, though. Aunt Margaret had multiple ideas for suitors. Marta didn't seem to be amongst them. He forced his mind to tackle this new information, to shift it around himself, and understand it as the truth. Then, he brought yet another false smile over his lips and joined everyone in the garden once more for a nightcap. Marta had only just arrived, and already, he felt vaguely heartbroken at the idea of losing her.

What a mentalist he was.

Chapter 4

Marta hadn't remembered much of Ewan's dear friend Baldwin. In her memory, he was just another shadow she chased after, twelve years old and full of endless spunk. Now, as she seated herself across from him in the garden, she felt mesmerised with his good looks. This was, incidentally, a frequent element of her existence. She'd been drawn to so many men, so many handsome men—assured beyond anything that she could woo them into her life, never to leave. Only a few weeks after her dear love had spurned her for another, she felt a bit foolish to look at Baldwin with such lust.

Oh, but he wasn't as dreadful as she'd initially suspected. In fact, his sobering nature had put her off—but later surprised her as he'd shrugged it off in place of something far more charming. That said, of course, he didn't seem to have the same adventurous qualities that she so yearned for in another. This was the very blood that beat through her veins, the thing she craved the most. Baldwin seemed far too sensible for anything like that. Already, he'd taken over much of the responsibility of his father's business—a fact that both impressed and bored Marta.

In the midst of her wild and swirling thoughts, Aunt Margaret appeared beside her once more. Marta yearned for just a moment or two of peace from her bumbling aunt. Her confusion at Laura and Laura's accent and Laura's only language had already put her off. She felt her tongue itching with annoyance, yearning to fly off and declare Aunt Margaret to be every bit a bigot.

But of course, this was Aunt Margaret's home. She wouldn't allow herself such lacklustre sensibilities.

Ewan, Uncle, and Baldwin had struck up a conversion together. This left the women together, a fact that made Marta's nose scrunch up.

"It really is such a pleasure to host you, my dear," Aunt Margaret said. Her voice wavered a bit, showing her level of drunkenness. "I cannot wait to tell you more about the first suitor I have lined up for you."

The words fell like stones into Marta's stomach. She swallowed, forced her tongue to calm, then turned and said, "My goodness. What marvellous news. Pray tell, who is he?"

Aunt Margaret's eyes widened. She looked rather frog-like. "His name is Lewis Remington. He's a Duke, recently granted the title by the Regent."

"Oh! The Regent," Marta said. Her words quaked with sarcasm, although she knew her auntie couldn't have guessed. In Marta's mind, a Regent meant very little. Her mother had given her all information about the class rules in England, but as they hadn't affected her life up till this point, she found them frivolous.

"That's right," Aunt Margaret returned, seemingly sure that she'd made some sort of positive impression. "Quite handsome, as well. He lives a terribly wonderful life, the sort of life you and I have always dreamed of. And I can only imagine what he might do for you, and for us, if…"

"Ah. I see," Marta said. She brought her eyebrows high, mocking her aunt. "He's quite connected."

“Yes. Terribly so,” Aunt Margaret returned. She beamed. “I always knew you were such a bright girl. Such a dear girl. And with those gorgeous eyes and that hair and figure! How could the Duke resist you? Yes, I imagine this will be quite the romantic summer for you, darling girl.” Aunt Margaret reached up towards Marta’s blonde curls and absently slipped one behind her ear.

Of course, this sort of mercenary approach wasn’t uncommon in Austria. It was the sort of thing women were groomed to do. In Marta’s eyes, she’d always been a bit too good for such a game—the sort of woman that should be sought. She’d envisioned this about herself until everything had crumpled weeks before. Now, she faced a different world, a world of Regents and Dukes and stoic men named Baldwin. Her tongue felt heavy from lack of German use. How she wished she could close her eyes and dive back into her bed, the one with the gorgeous view of the Alps. What a ridiculous thing to be so far from everything she loved.

And yet, Baldwin had been the only one to recognise this strangeness. What was it he’d said at dinner? Something about the two sides of her personality, the two sides of the continent. It had immediately made him seem much less stoic and far more poetic. Perhaps this sort of personality simmered just behind his eyes continually. Perhaps it took a particular type of human to draw it out.

“What say you, Baldwin?” Ewan said suddenly. His voice was a bit louder, tugging Marta from her reverie. “Will you attend Mother’s first party in a few weeks’ time? I know it’s not exactly your cup of tea.”

Baldwin’s dark eyes shot across the garden. Marta felt cowered beneath them. Why was it he caused her stomach to clench, her breath to stop?

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt me to do so,” Baldwin said. He arched one of his thick brows and continued to look at Marta. Perhaps he was too drunk to recognise how rude that was. Marta, from the more liberal Austria, didn’t mind his gaze.

In fact, she felt herself arch her back slightly and lift her breasts. He did not indicate that he recognised this movement. In fact, seconds later, his eyes fell away. Disappointment flooded her.

No. It was her eternal trick. She couldn’t toy with men like this, not any longer. She would follow along with the rules of courtship, there in England, and live like a dutiful creature, the sort of girl her mother could be proud of. This was meant to be a time to think, to learn, to grow—and it would behove Marta to pay attention to it. She couldn’t waste time.

“Wonderful,” Ewan said. He clapped his hand across Baldwin’s shoulder and shook him about. “I dare say we’ll breathe a bit of life into you before the season’s over.”

“Don’t you dare turn him into you,” Aunt Margaret said, both teasing and reproaching. “Ewan Thompson, I don’t know where on earth I went wrong.”

The rest of the hour dripped past. Throughout, Marta was genuinely shocked at how appealing Baldwin seemed to her. Occasionally, he made incredible jokes, ones that caused her body to ripple with laughter. As she shuddered with it, his eyes turned towards hers and seemed to peg her again. It was as though his expression read, “I see you. I wish to know you. I wish we were alone.”

But of course, it was very like Marta to read into such things.

Baldwin excused himself to return home after that. Aunt Margaret had already nodded off several times, her chin against her chest, and her hand nearly toppling the wine across her gown. Uncle hopped up, grabbed the wine, and coaxed Aunt Margaret to bed. At the exit from the garden, Aunt Margaret bumbled around to say, “Marta, you’re all right, aren’t you?”

This seemed like a loaded question. Certainly, she hadn’t a clue how to answer it. Marta scratched the back of her head and nodded. “I suppose so. Yes.”

When her aunt and uncle disappeared, this left only Marta and Ewan in the garden. Marta exhaled slowly, letting her eyes bug out. Ewan chuckled again. His good-naturedness gave her such ease, despite the strangeness of the circumstances.

“My mother can be quite wretched. You're far more patient than most,” he said.

Marta laughed. “I nearly lost my temper.”

“And it’s only day one!” Ewan said. “You’re her doll for the summer. Her plaything.”

Marta sniffed. “If only she knew what sort of situation I just fell out of. I dare say she wouldn’t look at me as such a beautiful and upstanding creature.”

“You were in a bit of trouble,” Ewan said.

“Something like that,” Marta returned. “Although it’s difficult to speak of. Suffice it to say, love has bitten me terribly hard, and I’m still reeling.”

“You reeled yourself all the way to England,” he returned.

“Ha. I suppose.”

“But it really isn’t so bad here,” Ewan affirmed. “Yes, Mother is a pain, and my sister can be even worse if you believe it. But it’s quite fun with the parties and the grandeur and the food and the wine, buckets of wine, darling cousin. Perhaps you’ll forget your lost love in Austria in no time. And if you’re anything like that adventurous, rambunctious girl I remember from seven years ago…”

“Oh, I still am,” Marta said, flashing a smile. “It’s difficult to remember her in the depths of all this despair. But you’re right. I already feel the past falling away from me, making room for something else.”

“Is it really so simple for you?” Ewan said. His smile widened still more.

Already, Marta sensed she had something of an ally in him. She nudged her head towards the space where his friend Baldwin had sat.

“He’s still about the same as before, isn’t he?”

Ewan cackled. “You mean, his serious nature.”

“Of course. The soberest teenager I’d met in my life, seven years ago,” Marta affirmed.

“He turned on a few charms tonight,” Ewan said. “Although I cannot imagine why.”

He gave her a peculiar look. She leapt up, cast her eyes back, and shuffled towards the garden gate. “I must rest, darling cousin. It’s been such a terribly long day. I can only imagine what sort of mischief your mother will bring for me tomorrow.”

“She’ll have you married before the week’s end, no doubt,” Ewan said.

“My freedom! Gone!” Marta said, giggling.

“Ah, but if you’d have had it your way, I’m sure you’d be married off to some handsome Austrian,” Ewan said. He creaked the garden gate closed and gave her another big-eyed look.

“Of course. But things in this life don’t necessarily go asplanned, do they?” Marta said. Her voice caught in her throat. “Nothing to dwell on. Not the way my mother dwells on the concept of England. Every day of my life, on and on about the things she missed, the world she

left behind. I don't think she truly sees Austria for what it is. It's her biggest detriment. I dare say she hasn't felt love for my father in… Well." She paused, pressed her lips together. "Silly me. I've only just met you again as an adult. I don't need to babble on like this."

Ewan shrugged. "It's all been rather dull the past few weeks. You're the first burst of life Baldwin and I have seen in quite some time."

"Ha. I'll try to keep up the act as long as I can," Marta said.

"As though it's an act. I know you, Marta Schnitzler. You're a dangerous breed. A woman who gets what she wants. And when things don't work out precisely in her favour—women like you burn down the world."

Ewan's words hummed around her mind as she crept upstairs to her bedroom. Slowly, she undressed, feeling as though she walked through a dream, her muscles languid and loose. When she stretched back on the bed, she blinked up at the enormous cheese-like moon and prayed for Austria. For reasons she couldn't fully fathom, she worried that the mountains wouldn't remain on without her—as though the reason they'd existed for so long had been purely because she'd been able to look up at them, morning and afternoon and night.

England. Blessed England. What on earth would it bring? And how could it possibly be as good as anything she'd had before?

Chapter 5

There was a fumble at the door. Marta's eyes flew open, and she shot up from the bed. She felt entirely discombobulated. Ordinarily, she awoke in a sunbeam, the mountain waving hello to her from the wide-open window. Now, the English countryside had boiled up a thick sky of clouds which curled overhead, seeming to press hard against her head and shoulders.

"What is it?" Marta mustered, remembering the door.

The door whipped open to reveal Laura. Her face was stricken, petrified. She closed the door with a slam and then leaned against it, her hands flat against it. The two young women stared at one another.

"Laura! What's happened?" Marta asked in German.

Laura sputtered, "Your Aunt Margaret has just shown me what's for breakfast. Oh, Marta, it's absolutely wretched. I dare say I'll never eat a single thing in this country. I'll become skin and bones, and then—what man will have anything to do with me?"

Marta hid the smile that peppered up behind her lips. She reached forward and patted the bed. Obediently, Laura perched at the edge, crossed her arms, and gazed out the window. "Dreadfully grey here, too. Don't they know there's a sun here? Don't they know that summer is just around the corner?"

“Laura, it’s really all right,” Marta said. “It will take some getting used to. But I imagine that once the season begins, the sun will be bright, and the conversation will be alive, and all will be…”

“But the food. It won’t change,” Laura insisted. “It’s just beans and sausages, Marta. Beans? Sausages? For breakfast? It turns my stomach. I hardly saw any sort of bread or rolls or…” She shook her head, a cloud forming over her face. “I hope I haven’t made a mistake in coming with you.”

“You haven’t, Laura! Really and truly, I can’t imagine what I would be going through if you weren’t here. I would feel dreadfully alone, and I would miss our language so greatly. It’s something of our secret, you know.”

Laura remained unsure. Marta clucked her tongue and said, “I will speak with my aunt to see if there’s any way around this food issue.”

“Oh, no!” Laura said. She clutched her cheeks. “I can’t imagine something like that. I don’t wish to seem ungrateful. It’s just…”

“Why don’t we go together to breakfast? I dare say I can drag you along with me to various meal functions over the next days. If you hate something, you can signal to me across the table. But remember, Laura—if you do eat with the other servants, the pickings won’t be quite as nice…”

Laura seemed overly willing to go with Marta wherever she went. She shot up from the bed and found Marta a gown for the day and helped her organise and perfect her beautiful curls. Laura seemed grateful to do anything she was accustomed to doing back in Austria. Marta’s

heart felt squeezed a bit; had she been selfish in her demand for Laura to come along? But Laura had seemed so excited, so earnest to begin a new life.

It's never clear what it is we want, is it? Marta thought to herself.

Downstairs, Aunt Margaret and Ewan sat at the breakfast table already. They spoke in low tones as Marta approached down the hall. She caught only a few blips of their conversation.

"I don't think it's necessary to cram Marta in with a whole number of highly arrogant men," Ewan said. "She's assuredly had some sort of wretched situation back at home, and she's fresh from it."

"And yet, that's the only way to get one's self through a situation such as this," Aunt Margaret returned, ever logical in her approach. "One must move forward, take chances, meet new men."

"As though you've ever been in a situation like this, Mother," Ewan returned.

"Darling, if you say another off-colour comment, I will tear that roll from your hand and throw it directly into your face," Aunt Margaret said.

Marta chuckled to herself. Beside her, Laura gave her an incredulous look. Marta made a mental note to continue with their English lessons later that day. It would be a way for them to connect in this strange place—and provide a decent backdrop for Laura. One on which she could stand.

When they stepped into the breakfast area, Aunt Margaret did her best to pretend that she and Ewan hadn't only just been in conversation about her. She beamed and chirped, "My beautiful niece! Good morning. I trust you slept well. I trust you BOTH slept well." She added this last bit with increased volume, still assured that Laura could understand her better when louder.

"We did, thank you," Marta said. She practised her false smile, one she'd seen smeared across her mother's face time and time again. "I wanted to bring Laura to breakfast. She'll be acclimated soon enough. We're simply far from anything she's ever known."

"I understand," Aunt Margaret returned. Her face, however, seemed to reflect how little she actually did.

The breakfast was in the classic English style. Marta recognised why it stirred fear in Laura's heart. It did seem entirely different from their Austrian breakfast feasts. However, she coaxed Laura along, helped her to add various portions atop her plate. She felt as though Laura was now her child, someone she had to guide towards proper behaviour. She couldn't bear the thought of this, not really, but knew it would only be a matter of time before she really latched onto the ways of England.

At least, this was what she hoped.

She watched as Laura snuck her spoon tentatively under a pile of beans. Aunt Margaret was telling Ewan some sort of tale about preparations for her upcoming party; thankfully, her attention remained elsewhere. Laura brought the spoon into her mouth and closed her eyes, and then swallowed the tomato-y, sweet beans.

Seconds later, her eyes popped open with wonder. She let out a strange squeak.

This time, Aunt Margaret understood: this was something to pay attention to.

“What on earth?” she said, interrupting her own stream of dialogue.

Laura grabbed her napkin and pressed it against her mouth. Aunt Margaret looked perplexed. “What’s got into her?” she demanded, her eyes darting towards Marta. “Has she grown ill?”

Marta spoke to Laura in German. “Is there something wrong? Are you choking?”

Laura shook her head. Slowly, she returned the napkin to the side of her plate and muttered, “It’s just that they’re so delicious.”

Marta’s grin widened. Aunt Margaret, out of the loop, demanded, “What did she say? My goodness, I’m hours away from banning this strange language from my table…”

“She’s only said that the beans are quite delicious,” Marta said. Again, she laughed. It was entirely outrageous, yet it filled her with some kind of promise, a brand of hope. If Laura could embrace the culture of eating baked beans for breakfast—perhaps Marta could embrace life in England, at least for a few months.

“Has she never eaten beans before?” Aunt Margaret asked incredulous.

“Not for breakfast,” Marta said. She glanced towards Ewan, who shared a large smile. “I think she’ll grow accustomed to all of this in no time.”

In truth, of course, she said this as a representation of her own mind.

Chapter 6

Baldwin hadn't seen Ewan for many days. He'd felt buried in a chaotic avalanche of work-related terrors. Throughout each hour, he felt more like a man acting out some sort of script—not like a man with real emotions or any type of proper vision of his life. When he sat at the dinner table each night and reflected on the events of his day, he felt strangely empty and void of excitement. Each day seemed to reflect the one before it and the one after. And his father only seemed to grow increasingly ill and less able to help. Baldwin felt time slipping away.

The only thing that had felt like a jolt of any life came in the form of Marta Schnitzler. Yet he hadn't had time to return to the Thompson Estate.

Baldwin was surprised to find Ewan in his back garden after a particularly gruelling day. His friend flashed him that now-familiar, cheeky grin.

"There he is. My dear friend. Twenty-five years old and going on forty-five, hey?" Ewan said. He hopped up from the garden bench and clapped Baldwin's shoulder.

Baldwin lent a fatigued smile. "Would you like a Scotch?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Ewan returned.

Baldwin hurried back to his study, poured them both stiff drinks, and returned to the garden. The moon lifted out from behind a mighty cloud and cast them in an eerie, grey light.

“My dear cousin has been quite a pleasure to have around the house,” Ewan affirmed.

Baldwin’s heart leapt towards his throat, then floated back down. “Oh?”

“Yes. I’ve learned bits and pieces more about the reason for her arrival. It’s quite fascinating. It seems she was in some sort of love triangle,” Ewan continued.

“Oh?” Did he sound disinterested? In truth, his heart thudded manically. What was it about this creature that stirred such an organic reaction.

“But it seems that she was jilted. Left. The man chose the other woman—and the other woman has crafted some sort of horrendous environment for Marta. It forced her out of the country!” Ewan continued.

It seemed outside the bounds of reason that any man could possibly choose another woman when given the option to be with Marta. Baldwin arched his brow and did his best to show only minor interest.

“Isn’t it fascinating?” Ewan demanded.

“Yes. Quite.”

There was a strange, simmering silence. Ewan adjusted and sipped his Scotch.

“I’ve known you a long time, Baldwin. I see it reflected in your eyes. You want to say something else. There are so many things whizzing about in that brain of yours.”

“Really, I promise you. There’s nothing. It was a rather difficult day and…”

“You will come to my mother’s party tomorrow evening, won’t you?”

Baldwin hadn’t forgotten. He’d spent the majority of the previous few days attempting to convince himself that he didn’t require such an affair. It would only tug him further away from the work he was required to do. Beyond that, he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to see Aunt Margaret link Marta up with anyone else.

“Really, you must. I know you hope and pray for your fiftieth birthday, but the truth of it is, you’re still alive and vibrant. If you don’t use these years to your advantage, you’ll regret it,” Ewan said.

“You speak as though I would ever listen to your advice,” Baldwin said. He gave Ewan a cheeky grin.

“You’re a menace,” Ewan said. “Just say you’ll be there. If anything, Marta needs our support.”

“Oh, yes. I’d like nothing more than to support Marta on her quest to find an eligible mate,” Baldwin said. His voice was edged with sarcasm—just enough to allow Ewan the slightest hint.

He would never admit it with words. It wasn’t his style.

**

When Baldwin entered his house once more, he found a dark figure in the hallway. At first, his heart lurched with fright. Within seconds, however, he realised that the man he’d discovered was only his sick father, standing upright yet sleepwalking. This was something the old man had done frequently over the past six months. Each time, Baldwin found himself terrified—then forced to face a strange walk-back, his hand across his father’s shoulder to guide him.

It wasn’t the sort of life Baldwin had ever pictured for himself.

Not that he’d pictured much of anything at all.

Now, like many other times previously, he wondered why he’d never had such a vision for his future. He’d never been wildly creative and volatile. He’d never been one to seize the future in this manic and passionate way.

Yet that was the sort of man Marta Schnitzler wanted for herself.

This was already clear.

It could never be him.

Chapter 7

Aunt Margaret took Marta shopping two days before her party. The older woman was a bustling creature of mania throughout these last days before, asserting her dominance over the various cooks and maids and other staff members—all of whom hustled to ensure that this first party, just before the season began, was the very best of the best. “I want this to set the tone for the rest of the season,” she’d said several times. Sweat dripped down the sides of her forehead. It seemed clear: she would settle for nothing less, and would blame anyone else if it failed.

“You must engage with the latest fashions, darling Marta,” Aunt Margaret said. The carriage clopped into the centre of the nearest town and halted just next to a dressmaker.

Marta glanced down at her gown. Admittedly, the colour was a bit off for England, and the neck had been stitched a bit too high. Women seemed to like to show much more of themselves here.

This suited her flirtatious sensibilities.

And if this was the way of the English courting game, she felt ready to play it.

“Whatever you pick for me, Auntie. I trust your judgement,” Marta said.

The stablehand assisted them out of the carriage. Laura arrived last on the cobblestones. She flashed a smile towards Marta and Aunt Margaret and said, in stuttered English, “What a beautiful town.”

It was, in a sense. It was entirely English: old-world and cutesy churches and little stumped-over buildings. Carriages clopped across the cobblestones, women walked arm-in-arm, and men drank pints towards the sides of the road, hovering outside of brasseries.

“Is it really so different from Austria?” Aunt Margaret asked. She furrowed her brow, as though she couldn’t envision anything else.

“Quite,” Marta returned. “But it doesn’t matter.”

Aunt Margaret led the girls into the dressmaker’s. Once inside, they grew lost in a haze of gorgeous and brightly-coloured fabrics, beautiful skirts, and low-cut necklines. The chatter was vibrant. The dressmaker asked Marta several times if she already had her eye on someone for the season. To this, Aunt Margaret insisted that she’d plotted out Marta’s entire season for her.

“How wonderful! You don’t have to do any of the work yourself,” the dressmaker chirped, without a hint of irony.

Marta arched her brow, laughing inwardly. “It’s really quite pleasant, isn't it?”

“Englishmen are the most handsome in all the world,” the dressmaker insisted. “I imagine Austrian men aren’t terribly rough to look at,

but…”

Now, Marta felt stabbed with a memory of her lost Austrian love. Where was he now? Wrapped around the beautiful girl he’d chosen instead of her? Had he learned yet that she’d gone to England, abandoning everything she’d ever known due to his decision?

Did he know what a rift he’d crafted in her life?

It didn’t matter.

Laura and Aunt Margaret helped Marta decide upon a light pink gown. It hugged her curves perfectly, thrusting her breasts upward and her waist inward. The fabric whirled around her feet as she turned this way, then that. Aunt Margaret clapped her hands, her eyes shining with tears.

“What a beautiful sight,” she whispered. “Not since my daughter have I felt this way.”

“You no longer look entirely Austrian,” Laura said in German. “You very much are dressed in the style of the English lady.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Marta asked.

Laura shook her head swiftly. “Absolutely not. If you’re to attend this party, I think it best that you fit in. As much as you, Marta Schnitzler, possibly can fit in. I know it’s something of a difficult thing for you.”

This was a fair assessment.

Once back in the carriage, Aunt Margaret chirped on and on about the upcoming party. “Every man will have his eyes upon you. You’re someone they’re unaccustomed to seeing. Already, your appearance at my estate has raised questions and conversations across the county. You’re a mystery, Marta Schnitzler. Use that to your advantage.”

“I know this game rather well,” Marta returned. There was a slight twinge of sadness to her voice.

For in truth, this wretched courting game was something she’d mastered back in Austria. But after finding love—and having that love refute her—she wasn’t entirely sure she had enough energy to throw back into it. She would shadow it, pretend as much as she could; she felt sure only the best of those who knew her, only Laura, would perceive the false nature of her act.

**

The following days were a flurry of preparation. The ballroom and gardens were decorated with gorgeous lights and flowers; smells of delightful food swirled out from the kitchen at seemingly every moment. Buckets and buckets of berry wine arrived, all for the benefit of their guests. At one point, Marta discovered Laura in the furthest garden, half-drunk and sipping berry wine swiftly, so as not to get caught.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, looking dispassionate about her own

apology. “It’s just already too much English.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get it in no time,” Marta returned, chuckling.

Back in Austria, she’d thought of Laura as a servant; yet here, she was her closest confidant, the only friend who recognised her as something more than “the Austrian girl on a visit.” She understood the backstory, understood the sadness that lurked behind Marta’s eyes.

“You can do this, you know,” Laura told her. She spoke clearly, despite the obvious wine stains across her teeth. “This game your aunt wishes to push you through. And all you have to do is be your charming self. Nothing more. Everyone will be captivated with you. They always are.”

“Except for the one who mattered the most,” Marta said.

Laura grabbed Marta’s wrist and squeezed. “He was an imbecile. Everyone knows that.”

Chapter 8

Hours before the party, Ewan's sister and Marta's other cousin, Tatiana, arrived via carriage. Marta watched in awe as the woman she remembered from her previous trip to England time-travelled her way from a youthful and beautiful teenager to a late-20-something, a mother of two children and a wife to a prominent Earl. Tatiana flashed a large smile as she stepped from the carriage. The girls held eyes for a moment—memory flickering between them until Tatiana whirled back around and assisted two young boys from the carriage. A sturdy-looking and important man appeared, broad-shouldered with curly blond hair. He used his hand to scrape something off of Tatiana's shoulder, some sort of dust from the ride.

They were a perfect little, idyllic English family.

"There she is! My beautiful Austrian cousin," Tatiana cried. She whipped her arms out as she approached and held Marta in a long hug.

When it broke, Marta was surprised at how emotional she felt. "My goodness! It's been ages," she began. "I'm terribly sorry again that I missed the wedding."

"Oh, darling, it's really nothing at all," Tatiana said. She tossed her hand around and then placed it atop a son's head. "Besides. So much has happened since then."

"So much in the form of two bright and handsome sons!" Marta said.

“Yes. This is Malcolm, and this is Walter. I would say they’re my pride and joy, but they got into quite a tiff on the way here,” Tatiana said.

Marta laughed. “When Aunt Margaret said you’d come for the party, I nearly fell out of my chair. I imagined you’d have too much to do.”

“Mother wrote that your maid could help with the boys?” Tatiana said. “That’s the only trouble we have. Theo and I wish to dance and laugh and perhaps drink a tiny bit too much. If we have someone helping to watch them…”

“It’s the sort of freedom we dream about,” Theo affirmed.

Aunt Margaret hadn’t mentioned this arrangement to Marta. Of course, Laura couldn’t very well attend the party, but Marta had hoped to sneak her as much wine as possible and give her the evening off.

“My maid doesn’t speak much English, I’m afraid,” Marta said.

“That shouldn’t be much of a problem. The boys speak in screams and yells, anyway,” Tatiana said.

Marta would have to find a way to make this up to Laura.

Aunt Margaret called out to them from the front door. “I’ve arranged for tea in the garden! Oh, my darling grandsons. Come to your grandmother!”

The boys seemed reluctant. Tatiana gave them a little shove, which forced them towards Aunt Margaret. She bowed and dotted their cheeks with endless kisses. Marta remembered this from long-ago: her aunt’s love for smothering. It wasn’t a comfortable thing to take as a child.

Back in the garden, Tatiana took a seat next to Marta and beamed at her. “I haven’t seen you since you were just a girl. It’s remarkable to see you now. All grown up. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, truly. The men in the county will fall to their knees before you…”

Marta rolled her eyes slightly. She’d grown fatigued of such conversation. “I can’t imagine that. Regardless, I’m looking forward to my first English party. I wonder how different they’ll be to Austrian affairs.”

“I wonder!” Tatiana returned. Her eyes remained orb-like. “My mother has quite the list of potential suitors for you. I imagine that she won’t give you a spare moment to yourself for the next months. In her mind, the only appropriate way to live is with a husband and children in the beautiful country of England. Whatever you might have had planned for yourself back in Austria simply won’t do.” She said it teasingly, yet Marta knew for a fact the words were lined with truth.

“I’m open to her suggestions, of course,” Marta said. Her eyes scanned watchfully towards her aunt, who remained in vibrant one-sided conversation with her grandsons. She held a ball aloft, on the verge of lending it to them. It seemed they had to go through countless trials before being allowed to play.

“She does mean well, of course. She suited me with my husband,” Tatiana continued. “She wants nothing more than for us all to grow old together. Having your mother in Austria all these years nearly destroyed her. She partially blamed herself, I think, for your mother’s unhappiness.”

Marta’s eyes flashed. So, it seemed common knowledge that her mother had been terribly unhappy in Austria. Her heart stirred with a mix of sadness and anger. She had sympathy for the fact that her mother surely couldn’t do much about her own unhappiness: she’d made an agreement and had carried it through, living out the rest of her days in Austria.

She’d just also decided to cast out that unhappiness to Marta. Make her stir in it. It was as though Marta herself had had to pay for her mother’s decision.

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The conversation drifted on after that. Marta, Ewan, Tatiana, Aunt Margaret, and later Uncle Everett spent the afternoon in the garden, whileMalcolm and Walter carried on just beyond: tossing a ball and screaming out to the enormous blue sky. Marta mentioned only once that she’d never seen such a summery day in England. Tatiana squeezed her hand and said, “Perhaps it’s the country welcoming itself to you?”

As the party inched closer, Aunt Margaret became wild with apprehension. She continually bustled to the kitchen, to the ballroom, to the garden, on a sort of rotation, to order people about. When she felt it time to prepare, she ordered everyone to return to their various quarters to dress and do their hair and makeup. When Marta appeared

back in her bedroom, she found Laura there, a little German book propped up on her chest. She'd sneaked away, it seemed, from her duties and from the English language, with a mission to dive back into her ordinary one. When she spotted Marta, her face brightened.

"Are you ready to prepare yourself for your introduction into the world of English courting?" she asked.

"Yes. But I'm afraid I can only keep you a short while," Marta said. She scrunched her nose as she informed Laura of her responsibilities that night.

Of course, Laura didn't exactly take the news in stride. "You know I have a sincere dislike for children," she recited.

"I do know that," Marta said. She began to unbutton her dress, feeling flummoxed. "But I promise you … it will only be tonight. Then, I'll inform my aunt that she cannot simply dip into your responsibilities. You're my maid—"

"And yet, you've hardly had me move a finger since our arrival," Laura returned.

"Yes. I know that," Marta said. In truth, she'd felt rather guilty for the past week. How could she possibly order Laura about when she felt the girl was terribly miserable? "Just take this as your first and final order for the week, won't you? I don't think the boys are so wretched…"

"Both boys?" Laura asked. She tossed her head and made a face. "How

terrible. Okay. Okay." She clenched her fists and muttered, "Just this once. But I'll pepper them with as much German language as I please. They'll be confused for all the evening."

"Yet perhaps you'll even teach them something," Marta said, laughing.

"I imagine nothing good will come out of this," Laura insisted. "Please don't suggest anything with such optimism."

Before she left to find the boys, Laura assisted Marta with her gown and hair and makeup. The process reminded Marta of long-lost affairs in Austria, as she'd prepared for meetings with her love. Certainly, her face remained the same—even if the style altered. But she felt none of the original bubbling of the stomach. Her interest in the evening was certainly piqued, yet she felt sure that she would be left disappointed.

When finished, Laura grumbled and retreated to find Malcolm and Walter. She pronounced Walter's name with a V instead of a W, a fact that Marta didn't wish to correct. Austrians and Germans had such trouble with the letter W. If she pointed this out, however, she felt sure that Laura would stomp out of the estate and find her own way back to Austria.

Marta gave a final glance into the mirror and then marched down the staircase and toward the area where the garden drifted off and gave way to the entrance of the elaborate ballroom. Back in Austria, Marta and her parents hadn't had such an immaculate estate; certainly, they'd held parties and those sorts of events, but nothing like what her aunt had in mind. She felt the simmer of excitement in the air as she approached.

Aunt Margaret had dressed beautifully, as was her way. Although

she'd grown a bit across the waist and hips and breasts, she knew how to suit her body to formulate a feminine shape. She beamed as Marta approached and placed a hand at her lower back. "Look at you, beauty. Every single man will have his eyes on you and only you."

Aunt Margaret shuffled off to prepare something. From the ballroom, the string quartet began to play their first of an infinite number of songs. Ewan stepped toward Marta and whispered, "You're her prize possession. Her great gift to the county."

"Ha. Don't remind me," Marta said. She gave Ewan a brief look then said, "You clean up quite nicely, don't you?"

"If there's so much as a curl out of place, Mother takes great pleasure in embarrassing me in front of everyone," Ewan admitted. "It saves me a great deal of time and heartache if I simply ensure everything is in line."

"I understand."

A few carriages approached. Tatiana, Ewan, and Marta entered the ballroom and were delivered three glasses of wine. Marta's heart bumped along a bit too quickly, proof of her anxiety.

"Who was it Mother had her eye on for you this evening?" Tatiana asked.

"Lewis," Ewan recited. "Lewis Remington."

Tatiana's eyes widened. "I see. She's aiming high for you, then. A Duke."

"Apparently so," Marta said. There was such reluctance in her voice.

"He's quite handsome. A great favourite of the Regent," Tatiana said.

"Now you sound like Mother," Ewan affirmed.

"I'm only telling her…"

"Baldwin!" Ewan's face brightened. He lifted a hand towards the entrance as his handsome jet-black-haired and sombre friend entered the ballroom. He clapped the man on the back and turned around, his eyes connecting with Marta's. "Baldwin here attempted to get his way out of tonight's affair, but I insisted he join us. Terribly difficult to drag him from his work."

"I've made plans to marry my desk," Baldwin said.

Marta's smile widened. She was surprised each time Baldwin uttered any sort of joke.

"Good evening, anyway, Marta. Tatiana," Baldwin said.

“It’s been a few months, hasn’t it, Baldwin?” Tatiana said. She gave him a once-over. “You’re looking a bit too thin.”

“He’s worked himself to death, dear sister. He doesn’t need any sort of disdain from you,” Ewan said.

“Very well,” Tatiana said with a heavy sigh. “I hope you’ll enjoy yourself. You’re still a bit too young to close yourself off from the world.”

“And still more unsolicited advice!” Ewan cried.

Marta chuckled. The banter amongst Englishmen and women seemed to far outplay the conversation back in Austria. This, thus far, was one of the only benefits she perceived from life in England.

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The ballroom began to fill. Tatiana and Marta sidled off while Baldwin and Ewan headed away to speak with another friend of theirs. Tatiana clucked her tongue and said, “I always worry about dear Baldwin. Such a serious man. He and Ewan balance one another out very well. But in my mind, they’ll always be my younger brothers. It’s a difficult thing for me to imagine either of them growing up.”

The women who entered the ballroom were beautifully dressed: their fabrics glowing as they shuffled forward, their breasts bulging out. Laughter rang through the air, cutting through the orchestral music, and men and women cast eyes to one another with wonder and excitement. This was to set the stage for the upcoming season. Perhaps

some would even begin their courting now.

Marta remembered a similar feeling the previous year in Austria. How she'd ached to be in love. How she'd yearned to find herself in the arms of a man who could love her enough, love her for who she truly was.

She'd thought she'd found it.

Marta couldn't help noticing that many of the men who strutted through the door cast their eyes towards her rather soon after. Their eyes lingered on her just a moment too long. Some of them whispered in one another's ears. She could only imagine what their words were. "There she is. The Austrian girl." "There she is. So different from us."

Tatiana's elbow found Marta's side moments later. She nearly leapt from her skin. "What is it?"

"That's him. The man my mother wants you to meet," she whispered. She did it coyly, without hardly moving her lips.

Marta followed Tatiana's gaze across the ballroom. A gorgeous dark-blond man with broad shoulders and bright blue eyes entered. He looked spectacular, somehow evoking far more riches in even his manner of walking. All eyes turned towards him, escaping Marta, and one could hear it buzzing on the lips of closer passersby. The Duke. He'd arrived.

Suddenly, there was a delicate hand on her shoulder. She whipped around again to find Tatiana, whom she'd incidentally forgotten all

about. Tatiana's smile grew wider. "I want you to meet someone. Come on."

"Are you doing your mother's bidding?" Marta asked.

"Perhaps. But he truly is a wonderful man. You'll like him."

Marta followed Tatiana towards the far end of the ballroom. Once there, they found a dark-haired and bright-eyed man, who Tatiana introduced as "Michael Rollins."

"Michael and I grew up together," Tatiana said. Her eyes glittered with excitement. "We had quite the obsession with one another when we were, oh, eleven? Twelve?"

This meant that Michael was a good bit older than Marta—perhaps ten years or so. Marta placed her most flirtatious smile across her lips and curtsied.

"You're from Austria, aren't you?" Michael asked.

"I'm afraid so," Marta said.

"It's been quite the talk of the county," Michael continued. "You and your maid, speaking German to one another. It's as though you have a secret from the rest of us."

“Perhaps we’re plotting to take over,” Marta returned.

Michael laughed good-naturedly. He cast his eyes back towards Tatiana. Marta could see his gratefulness reflected back. He was glad to have met her.

“I hope you do. England needs a bit of reshaping,” Michael continued. “Don’t you agree?”

“I believe so. Although my maid certainly has taken to your affinity for beans in the morning. She won’t shut up about them. If she ever returns home, I don’t know what she’ll do,” Marta said.

Michael laughed again. He seemed simple, easy. When he asked her to dance during the next song, she agreed without hesitation. She didn’t feel incredibly attracted to him; she knew only that this sort of game, this sort of conversation, it was all a part of what her aunt required of her. It was a rhythm, something she understood.

The dance ended without much pomp or circumstance. Michael gave her a firm gaze and said, “I do hope that we’ll be able to dance again soon. Thank you for it.”

When she was released, she nearly toppled into Ewan. “Oh, goodness,” she said. “You gave me such a fright.”

Ewan chuckled. “I see you’ve had a dance with dear Michael. Good lad. Rather boring.”

“I got that. He did seem to appreciate a few of my jokes,” Marta returned.

“Your bar has been set rather low in the wake of the Austrian incident, hasn’t it?” Ewan asked.

“Not a conversation I’d like to dip into tonight, thank you,” Marta returned.

Ewan laughed. Baldwin appeared beside him, his black eyes boring into her. What was it about his gaze that made her forget, for a moment, who she was?

“Michael, hmm?” Baldwin said.

“I’ve heard he’s not exactly famous for his intriguing conversation,” Marta said.

Baldwin gave a light shrug. “Never thrilled me.”

“And not the sharpest amongst us,” Ewan continued.

“You must ensure I don’t dance with another dud.” Marta laughed. Her heart felt light, child-like. This flirtation thrilled her.

“Hasn’t Mother introduced you to Lewis Remington yet?” Ewan asked.

“I’m afraid she’s been too busy,” Marta said.

“She’s always the socialite, isn’t she?” Ewan said. “If you didn’t remind her of her age, I think she’d just assume she was still twenty-three.”

“That’s a good thing. I hope to remain always in such light spirits,” Marta returned.

“Not like Baldwin. Baldwin has always been approximately fifty years old,” Ewan said again, rapping his friend across the shoulder.

Marta grinned wider. Baldwin rolled his eyes and offered, “Not all of us can live the life of children, Ewan. Thankfully I’m always here for you to pick up the slack.”

“Oh! He has teeth,” Ewan said.

The Duke sauntered across the ballroom. He seemed amid conversation with a particularly beautiful brunette, a girl a full head shorter than Marta, with large breasts and a dark red gown. Marta swallowed and felt a strange jolt of jealousy. She didn’t know where it had come from. Now, as she turned her eyes back towards Baldwin, she realised that both he and Ewan had ogled the girl.

“Perhaps he’s already found a partner, regardless,” Marta said. It could be devastating—couldn’t be anything at all. These were people she hardly knew. One day soon, she’d be back in Austria. All of this would be a memory. Perhaps it would seem like a nightmare.

But almost on cue, the Duke spuns toward her Aunt Margaret. It seemed she’d said his name, although Marta couldn’t have heard it over the orchestra and the bubbling conversation. The Duke smiled at Aunt Margaret. It was a pleasant smile, one that didn’t stretch up towards his eyes. He leaned down a bit to listen to what she had to say. Then, his eyes traced up towards Marta. Their eyes locked.

Marta waited. She expected something to happen within her—that bubbling sensation that she was accustomed to when she was attracted to someone. Just now, she felt nothing but a stone in her stomach.

“Looks as though she’s trapped him,” Ewan said,his eyes sparkling. “Baldwin, I believe it’s time for both of us to go.”

Just before they turned away, however, Baldwin locked eyes with Marta. His eyes were humble, honest, the sort of eyes she could have gazed into for hours, days, years. She felt it, then: the fluttering.

But no. This was only Baldwin, her dear cousin’s best friend. He was an extension of the family and a boring extension at that.

Wasn’t he?

Aunt Margaret and Duke Remington approached, then. As they

walked, the Duke's blue eyes locked with hers once more. He seemed to half-listen to whatever it was Aunt Margaret prattled on about. When they finally reached Marta, she felt as though she'd been hunted. She clenched her glass of wine hard and prepared a smile: the sort of smile her Aunt Margaret wanted her to craft.

"Marta, I'd like to introduce you to Lord Lewis Remington," Aunt Margaret said. Her voice was overly sweet, almost difficult to listen to as it was terribly high-pitched.

Lord Remington bowed a bit, yet kept his eyes up towards hers. "Good evening, Lady Schnitzler…"

Marta chuckled to herself. This was far different than the ordinary version of her name: Fraülein Schnitzler. She curtsied in response and said, "Thank you. It's lovely to meet you, as well."

"I spotted you when I first came in," Lord Remington continued.

Aunt Margaret slowly slipped away, her eyes glowing. She seemed like a witch, one who'd just peppered a bit of magic through the air. Marta forced her eyes back to the rather delicious-looking Duke.

"What was that?"

"I mean, who could avoid sight of you? You've been the talk of the county for weeks now. We heard that the beautiful Austrian cousin prepared to join our humble season and, well. I don't think it's too great a stretch to say we all knew the world would never be the same as a result."

Marta so yearned to roll her eyes. “You’ve been quite a subject as well, My Lord. And now I see why.”

It was clear that the Duke was accustomed to flattery. He beamed at her and bowed his head just slightly. “Would you care to dance with me?”

“Of course,” she said.

“The first dance with the Austrian cousin. What could I have possibly done to deserve such an honour?”

Very soon, Marta found herself in the arms of the handsome and arrogant, blue-eyed Duke Remington, the man her Aunt Margaret would assuredly stop at nothing to bring her to marry. Her hand latched over his; his large one remained at her back. They swept up in the magic of the orchestral piece. She ordered her heart to swoon, to exert some sort of effort. Perhaps it was too soon after all the chaos at home to feel anything similar.

“Tell me, beautiful Marta. What is it like in Austria?”

Marta laughed lightly. “It’s nothing like England. I can tell you that for certain.”

“Your tone suggests that you’re not entirely smitten with our England,” Lord Remington said.

“Am I so easy to read?”

“I just can’t imagine why a beautiful Austrian woman like yourself willingly left her gorgeous mountains and stunning rivers and assuredly bountiful buckets of beer for our rather grey and rule-oriented England,” Lord Remington returned.

“Ah! So you’ve been in Austria,” Marta said. Her heart swelled with warmth.

“Only twice,” he said. “I truly was mesmerised.”

“Why did you ask me what it was like, then?” Marta returned. She furrowed her brow.

“I wanted to hear the poetics of it in your own voice,” the Duke said.

Ah. It was clear that he knew precisely what to say. She tilted her head and decided to live in it, this strange moment in which a very powerful and handsome man demanded to know her true heartfelt emotions.

“I’ll tell you this, Lord Remington,” she said. “I’ll tell you that every morning when I awoke, I said good morning to my beautiful mountain range. I’ll tell you that my friends and other dear ones were some of the most compassionate creatures I’ve met in my life. And I’ll tell you that my father—a tried and true Austrian himself—is one of the best

men I've ever known. The fact that I'm in England is something of a mistake. But I'm choosing to make the best of it."

"And the best of it suits you," Lord Remington returned.

"And what about you? You've grown up around here, I suppose? This has been your reality—the sort of poetics you spout when you go anywhere else?" she asked.

"This is my home. I've loved it in my bones since I was just a child. I can't envision going elsewhere for long."

"And now that you're Duke…" Marta said.

"As though you know the intricacies of our system," Lord Remington returned.

"My mother taught me everything. It was a bit of a monstrous thing to deal with as a child. I asked her repeatedly why it was important, as I was an Austrian girl, through and through. This enraged her still more," Marta said.

"She sounds like a proper Englishwoman," the Duke said.

"If she heard you say that, she would most certainly swoon," Marta said.

The song ended soon after that. Marta wasn't regretful that it had ended; rather, she breathed a sigh of relief as the Duke bid her farewell, bowed, and said he hoped to speak to her again throughout the evening. When Marta spun back around, she glanced around to find her cousins. Only Tatiana was in sight. She broke off from her husband Theo and approached her, her hands wrapped around her shoulders to squeeze a bit too tight.

"I see my mother has worked her magic on you," she said.

"Perhaps," Marta said. Anxiety wrapped itself around her neck and then her stomach and made it difficult for her to breathe.

"Are you all right, Marta?" Tatiana asked. Her eyebrows furrowed. "Perhaps you'd like to step outside for a moment. The garden is quite empty, and it's a bit easier to breathe."

"Oh. Yes. Goodness, yes."

As Marta swept behind her, her thoughts churned strangely. She felt she'd been cast back to that horrendous afternoon when she'd learned the truth of her love's decision; she'd been labelled the other woman. They'd been allowed the life she'd yearned for. Now, she was forced through the chaos of another culture, of another round of handsome and arrogant men, all in a separate language.

When she and Tatiana reached the garden, she heard several cries from far beyond the shrubs. Aghast, she said, "What on earth?"

Tatiana chuckled. “It’s only my children. I would recognise those screams anywhere. They’re terribly difficult to put to bed. Your maid must have taken them for a final runaround.”

Poor, dear Laura. The woman who’d agreed to this horrendous lifestyle.

“Do you think these seasons last a terribly long time?” Marta suddenly asked. She arched her brow towards her beautiful, older cousin, already painfully aware that her question had been outlandish and strange.

Tatiana didn’t make her feel bizarre for the question. She simply said, “I think it lasts a long time if you think of it that way. My advice is this. Why not have as much fun as you can. Live in whatever strange conversations as long as you can. Analyse it all from every single angle. When you’re an older woman like me, you will miss these days. Now, everything in my life is so certain. I must be home. I must ensure dinner is prepared. I must ensure my husband is happy. And I must ensure that my sons become good and powerful men. It’s a great deal to think about.”

“And right now, all I must think about is…”

“Having a good time. And don’t you dare worry about what my mother has in store for you. You can feel and do whatever you wish during this time.”

Tatiana reached across and squeezed Marta’s hand. Again, her sons screeched out towards the moon. A voice that sounded like Laura’s rang out after them. If anything would teach her English, it was this: the necessity to translate how out of control the boys were. This was a

fact that made Marta smile.

Chapter 9

Baldwin found himself once more in conversation with a young woman he'd briefly thought, two or three years before, he might wish to court. Her name was Penelope Sussel, and she was quite pretty and red-headed, similarly sombre and seemingly eager to settle. She looked at him with large green and expectant eyes. She'd never asked him why, when it seemed that they'd been meant to be together, he hadn't taken the plunge. He was grateful for this, as it was rather difficult to explain.

Of course, tonight seemed to be far different.

"It's difficult, seeing you again," she said, after the initial hellos and how are yous.

She arched her brow, which was also red, as he sputtered and asked, "What on earth do you mean?"

"You know precisely what I mean," she said.

Baldwin pressed his lips together for a long time. How could he possibly verbalise it? He'd been too committed to work; he'd been there for the decline of his father; he'd felt that his time was better utilized when drinking with Ewan rather than sitting quietly in the garden with her; he hadn't felt a powerful connection; he hadn't been able to picture his life with her. The words poured from his mouth.

“I really don’t,” he uttered. “But it’s wonderful to see you again, Penelope. Pray tell, how was your winter? Spring?”

Penelope made an annoying hiccup sound in her throat. “You were never one for provocative conversation, dear Baldwin. Those hours we spent together, I so yearned for you to open up. To tell me what you actually felt. But you seemed so void of feeling. It was as though someone else had operation over your tongue—and that someone else wanted only to speak of the weather. I knew you through Ewan and thought that that would be a reflection of who you were. Goodness, wasn’t I incorrect?”

“Have you considered a conversation with Ewan, then?” Baldwin returned. “I think he’s rather alone at the moment.”

“You can’t get rid of me so quickly,” Penelope said. She clenched her glass of wine a bit too hard, an act that made her fingers bright white.

Baldwin so yearned to ask her how many glasses she’d had since the beginning of the party. It was a stroke of luck, then, that when he glanced up, he spotted Marta dancing with the Duke, Lord Remington: a sight that made his heart feel squeezed with terror. Of course, he’d known that Aunt Margaret wanted to suit them up. It was ever her decree to link together her beautiful son and daughter and nieces and nephews with other more powerful and connected creatures. But when Lord Remington had first approached, Baldwin had, for reasons he couldn’t fully fathom, assumed that they wouldn’t stitch together. Yet here was proof that he was wrong.

“I see that I’ve already lost you,” Penelope said. She again clucked her tongue. Annoyance filtered across her face. “What is it this time, Baldwin? Hmm?”

“Terribly sorry. I lost myself for a moment.” Baldwin blundered a bit. “Perhaps…”

The song ended. Suddenly, he watched as Marta left the ballroom with Tatiana. His heart dipped into his stomach. He was grateful that she hadn’t inclined to remain with the Duke. What sort of things had they discussed throughout their dance? Had she given him a piece of herself that she’d been unwilling to give him?

Foolish. It was foolish, all of it. Baldwin hadn’t given Marta any inclination that she should consider him in such a fashion. Beyond that, Aunt Margaret hadn’t planned for it.

Penelope clucked her tongue. “Won’t you ask me to dance at least, Baldwin?” she demanded. “i’ve put up with years of your abuse, and I yearn only for a single swirl…”

“Very well.” In truth, Baldwin would have danced with anyone, such was his glee that Marta had ceased her conversation with the Duke.

Penelope looked overjoyed at this fact. She latched her hand in his—and it was admittedly quite creamy and soft—and he found the crook at the base of her back. In moments, they collected themselves in the centre of the floor. Baldwin focused his feet on the steps he’d learned long ago and hardly listened as she prattled on about this and that: her relationship with her sister, the fact that her mother yearned for grandchildren. In truth, Baldwin hardly remembered anything about her mother and sister. They were merely grey shadows lurking behind his eyes.

When the dance finished, he bowed and thanked her. She said, “Find me again later. I’ll ask for another dance. I think you owe me at least two.”

But Baldwin was assured that this wouldn’t occur. He swept back across the floor, grabbed a glass of wine, and hunkered near Ewan. Ewan himself was amid another conversation with a beautiful blonde girl he’d met previously. Baldwin couldn’t remember her name. When she opened her lips to laugh, the laugh was dreadful and high-pitched, almost animal-like. Why was it he felt that he couldn’t listen to anyone laugh beyond Ewan and, admittedly, Marta?

As he waited, Marta and Tatiana re-entered the ballroom. His heart felt squeezed with delight, yet he ensured that this emotion wasn’t reflected in his face. Tatiana and Marta approached, looking rather sheepish, as though they’d been amid some sort of deep, world-flipping conversation. These were the sort that Baldwin was entirely accustomed to, although Ewan wasn’t necessary keen on them.

“Good evening thus far?” Baldwin asked. He was grateful that his voice remained chipper.

“Quite!” Tatiana returned. “We’ve just heard my sons screaming in the garden. I’m grateful that I don’t have them to myself just now.”

“I don’t envy whoever is at their mercy,” Baldwin said, chuckling.

“My maid,” Marta interjected. “Darling girl. She’ll be back in Austria in a few hours’ time. She’s never really taken to children.”

“What a funny thing! I never imagined that to be any sort of option,” Tatiana said. “Not taking to children. As a woman?”

“She’s a rather different sort of woman,” Marta admitted. Her eyes glowed beautifully.

Suddenly, Theo appeared behind his wife. His hand latched around her back, and he tugged her close to whisper in her ear. Her face cracked with laughter. Seconds later, Theo whisked her across the floor. Their feet took on the dance steps perfectly, and Tatiana flipped her head out, making her curls shake.

“They’re really a beautiful couple,” Marta said. Her voice sounded rather far away, as though the view bothered her.

“It’s a difficult thing, isn’t it? Discovering any sort of partner who suits you,” Baldwin said.

Marta arched her brow. “I spotted you speaking with a red-headed woman. Quite beautiful.”

“Ah. So I see you’ve spied on me already,” Baldwin returned.

“Perhaps. I must admit, you looked rather displeased.”

“That is quite an understatement,” Baldwin said. He flashed a larger smile, surprising even himself, and said, “For reasons I never understood, she always wanted something more to happen between

us. We sat together in silence for hours at a time. She would end each occasion with—ideas about engagements. About when I could ask her father to marry her. It did my head in. I couldn't envision a life in which she was my wife. Or even, really, my friend."

"Quite harsh, Baldwin," Marta said.

"Indeed. It seems I've fallen completely into honest territory. How wretched of me."

Marta's cheeks burned pink. He again marvelled at her beauty and her ease while standing before him. He felt he could speak to her so plainly, as though she were only another facet of his own mind.

He'd never experienced anything like this in his life.

"Would you like to dance with me?" he asked suddenly. The words flew out. By the time they jumped off his tongue, it was too late to fetch them.

To his infinite surprise, she agreed. "I don't have a partner. Thank you for saving me from such embarrassment."

"It's still the beginning of the season, Fraulein Schnitzler. You'll have time to find a proper partner."

"Thank you for taking such pressure off my shoulders."

They came together. He found her hand easily, gripped it tenderly, felt a little jump in his chest. Her delicate feet took up the steps. After a few moments, he felt her fumble. She clenched her eyes tight and said, “Oh, goodness. We don’t do this one so often in Austria. I’ve forgotten it.”

“You’re a foreign woman in a foreign land,” Baldwin said. He laughed softly and assisted her back on the right path—guiding her with words, telling her where to step next.

“Thank you. You’re a marvellous teacher,” she said, blushing. “I’m quite embarrassed. All those lessons my mother paid for. All those years she hammered it in: that I must become a proper English girl, in order to find a proper English husband…”

“And now, it seems that all those lessons were for naught,” Baldwin said.

“You’re dreadful,” she said. Her eyes glittered. “But I must say, the way Ewan picks at you. It’s rather much, isn’t it?”

“I get him back when I please,” Baldwin returned. “We’re very much brothers. I don't know what my life would be like without him.”

“I feel a bit similarly at the moment about my maid, Laura,” Marta returned. She again furrowed her brow. “In fact, I think I’ll save her rather soon from those ravenous animals—my second-cousins.”

“Tatiana and Theo seem to be having a splendid time without them,” Baldwin said.

“Yes. The label of this evening seems to be selfishness. And I’m afraid that I’ve dipped into it, as well.”

“You’ve travelled a great distance to live this frivolous existence. Allow yourself as much time as you can,” Baldwin returned.

“Tatiana just said something quite similar,” Marta remarked.

“And yet, mine is heaped with sarcasm,” he said.

“I had a feeling about you. That nearly everything you said had several different layers. I just wasn’t entirely sure I was correct until this very moment,” she said.

“Perhaps I wear a sort of shield around everything,” Baldwin returned.

Why did he speak so plainly with her? He felt far different from the man who’d sat in the garden with Penelope, unable to muster a single sound.

The song ended far too quickly. It made Baldwin double-check his understanding of the concept of time. Marta curtsied once more and moved back towards Ewan, who’d fallen once more into conversation with his sister. When Marta arrived, Tatiana wrapped her arms around Marta’s shoulders, closed her drunken eyes, and exhaled, “Goodness,

I'm glad you're here! It's been far too long."

"If anyone says that again, I don't know what I'll do," Ewan said. "It's grown too tired, hasn't it, Marta?"

Marta looked sheepish. Her eyes again connected with Baldwin's. He felt he could comprehend the weight of her thoughts. In this instance, she wished everyone would halt their conversation about her.

But of course, this was all his perception. He might have had her miswritten in his head. What did he know?

Chapter 10

Marta broke out of Tatiana's rather uncomfortable hug and again dropped her eyes from Baldwin's. This sort of bump in her chest when she locked eyes with him, she required it to end. It had been a flurry of life, of conversation, of activity, and now she felt guided back towards the garden to ensure Laura was all right. Although she did love Tatiana a great deal, she felt bizarre about the selfish nature of Tatiana's request for Laura to oversee her children for so much time.

As she marched back towards the garden, however, she stumbled back into Laura and the children themselves. All three wore the brightest of smiles. Laura, who hadn't grinned so broadly since she'd eaten her first batch of breakfast beans, let out a loud and child-like laugh. "Marta! It's you!" She said the words in English.

"Hello!" The boys rushed towardsMarta and hugged her, trying their best to wrap their thin arms around her gown. She placed her hands on their fuzzy heads and asked, in German, what had occurred.

"Oh, nothing much. We just ran ourselves silly," Laura returned. "I want to take them to bed and then put myself there, too. If you don't mind, that is."

"Laura, I'm terribly sorry that they put you through so much terror," Marta said.

"No terror at all," Laura returned. "It was quite fun, actually. Perhaps I only detest Austrian children. Not English children. What a difficult

fact to face, especially as it seems any children I have will be half-Austrian themselves!"

As they'd spoken in German, the children had peered up at both of them curiously. "What is that?" Malcolm asked.

"It's a different language," Marta returned. "What have you said to them throughout these hours, Laura?"

"I've spoken the three words I know best," Laura returned. "Go. Fast. Hello. They've loved it. They ran until they collapsed."

Laura and the children disappeared down another hallway and then swept up the stairs. Marta remained, perplexed, then glanced back across the ballroom. As she did, she caught sight of Ewan and Baldwin once more. Baldwin's eyes found hers—it seemed they always knew precisely where to look. She felt eerily drawn back to them.

Oh, but Baldwin had done nothing to insinuate that he wanted anything at all to do with her. Why was it her brain played such wretched tricks? In truth, the man she needed to pay any sort of attention to was Lord Remington. And there, towards the window, speaking with another gentleman, he stood. Marta instructed her heart to beat a bit faster. She yearned for the sort of life that love generated to flow through her again. Yet she wasn't entirely sure it was possible to draw it up on command.

After all, wasn't this her designated fate? She'd been forced to England, forced to take upon whatever her Aunt Margaret's current inclinations for her life were; now, she felt a bit like a puppet, pledged to perform a single action for the remainder of her lacklustre womanhood.

Even now, Aunt Margaret arrived—looking rather smug, her eyes connecting with many of the women and men who swept past her. Each said a kind word, a compliment, and she beamed at each of them separately, touched their elbows, ensured that they knew just how important they were to the entire affair. When Aunt Margaret finally reached Marta, she looked as though she'd overstuffed herself at a feast, such was the air of her body and soul. She'd consumed the incredible happiness of the evening and informed herself of her own congratulations.

"Darling, there you are," Aunt Margaret said.

Marta, who'd never felt small in her life, currently did. She still towered over her aunt, this was sure, but her aunt had a manner of peering down her nose at anyone, including those who crept above her.

"I've just discussed you with Lord Remington himself," Aunt Margaret continued.

Marta's stomach shifted. She felt as though she'd eaten something a bit off.

"He's an excellent man and has really taken to you," Aunt Margaret said. "I dare say he'll approach rather soon and inform you of his wishes."

"And yet, he seems entirely preoccupied where he is," Marta said with a wry smile.

Aunt Margaret sniffed. “Don’t be foolish, my girl. Lord Remington must keep up appearances throughout the county. Every single creature here yearns for a moment alone with him. And you, darling girl, have captured much more than that.”

Aunt Margaret seemed rather convinced that dallying there beside her niece was a pure waste of time. Thus, she crept off almost immediately, offering a bright, “Goodness, hasn’t it been ages?” to the next creature she discovered. Marta blinked off towards Lord Remington once more, wondering if what Aunt Margaret had said resembled any sort of truth.

As the evening crept past, more and more men seemed to hunt for Marta’s attention. She found herself circling the ballroom with several other suitors, all of whom seemed desperately curious about Austria, about her travels, about whether she could see herself in England for the remainder of her days. To these last questions, she scoffed inwardly.

What a wretched thing to ask--and what a narrow-minded thing, as well! Why should she consider the remainder of her days away from her beautiful, mountainous Austria? Frankly, a few fine clothes, an orchestra, and a night of handsome Englishmen—it all wasn’t enough to convince her of anything else.

But flirtation did come back to her naturally, as though she was a child who’d already learned to walk and now wanted to run. She found her tongue flipping out ridiculous and humorous things, words that caused whichever man amid reckless flirtation to chuckle, his hand across his cravat, and his eyes dancing with wonder. “I’ve never met anyone quite like you, Marta Schnitzler,” were the words they usually found.

Chapter 11

Far different from him. This much was clear, and nothing Ewan was required to remind him of, with useless words spit into his ear as the evening crept towards lateness. “A party girl. The sort of girl who got herself involved with a love triangle back home! Certainly the sort of life we required in our stuffy English season,” Ewan said. His words were slurred together, proof of his drunkenness, and he grinned a crooked grin throughout. It seemed he’d abandoned all desire to dance with any beautiful women and had slouched himself against the wall next to Baldwin. His eyes glowed sleepily, but his foot tapped along right with the beat—proof that some sort of personality still lurked within.

“She must recognise all this for what it truly is, though,” Baldwin began. Even as he articulated the words, he found himself doubting them. “Mustn’t she see how frivolous it all is?”

Ewan seemed not to have heard him. He hummed along with the new orchestral tune, which swept through the air and seemed to sizzle through the arms and legs and torsos of the beautiful listeners. Even Marta knocked her head back and closed her eyes, seeming to inhale the sounds as they fell over her. It was akin to watching someone dance in the rain. Baldwin was overwhelmed with the idea that this woman, this Marta, was far more alive, far more volatile, far freer than he ever had been or ever would be.

Perhaps this alone was proof that she would never consider him to be anything more than what he was: her cousin’s dear, albeit quite annoying and sombre, friend.

Throughout this dance and the next, Marta linked herself with first a broad-shouldered dark-haired man who, Baldwin thought, might have been him from behind, but revealed himself to have a rather staggeringly huge nose from the front. He imagined telling this to Marta and causing her to erupt with laughter. The thought of that laughter both thrilled him and alarmed him. Why did he yearn for something so fictional? Why did he hang his hat upon the concept?

Suddenly, Marta herself spun towards him. Her eyes connected with his. It felt like a fist to the gut. He nearly keeled over, his thoughts stirring and then spinning wildly. How could he possibly articulate them? Oh, but all too soon, she stood before him, her blue eyes sparkling. He suspected they reflected every lake, every pool across Austria. She seemed the sort of woman who could reflect the world's magic.

"Baldwin! I see you've taken your place as peaceful watchman over the party," Marta said.

"You know our Baldwin," Ewan interjected. "We wouldn't be safe without him. He knows precisely when to step in to eliminate that last bit of fun…"

But Marta's eyes didn't linger on her cousin. Rather, she fell into a slight curtsy and said, "I seem to have found myself again without a dance partner. What a pity."

Baldwin questioned her motives. Did she yearn only to utilise him for her own sport—to toy with his emotions for her own selfish gain? As the music swelled, he felt guided by an unseen and unknown force. His hand slipped across the little curve of her lower back; her tiny hand found his. He felt dominant, sure, no longer the stoic and faraway creature in the corner but the formidable man who dared to dance with Marta Schnitzler, belle of the ball, a second time. He

imagined the ballroom's flurry of conversation: did you see them? What do you think has got into him? Does she really offer such magic to tug Baldwin Terrence back onto the floor?

"How has your evening been?" Baldwin asked. Immediately afterwards he cursed himself for asking such a banal question.

But Marta seemed grateful for the question. "To be honest with you, it's been a rather strange burst back into the social world. I struggled more recently with a dismissal from what I assumed at the time to be my entire life--the societal gossip and parties and courting of Austria. Now, it appears I've joined yet another jungle."

"And a jungle it most certainly is," Baldwin returned.

Marta chuckled. "You seem happy enough to stay as far out of it as you can. I must say, I respect it far more than I respect Aunt Margaret's view on things. The woman's lifeblood is gossip."

"And always has been," Baldwin returned. "I love the woman dearly, but she sees you far more like a doll at the moment, meant to be dressed up and played with."

Marta's eyes glittered. "And I suppose she doesn't see you that way."

"Unfortunately not. All my life, I've so yearned for Aunt Margaret to lift me up, dance me around like a little toy soldier. Yet all my life, she's deemed me far too serious for such action."

“Consider yourself terribly lucky,” Marta said.

Ah, but the truth of it: Baldwin felt only luck while his arms wrapped themselves tenderly around Marta’s thin frame. He felt this luck as his feet found sure and soft steps alongside Marta’s. He wished he could have paid the orchestra half his yearly wages if only to extend this song three minutes more. All too soon, as their conversation drummed on with light and excitement, the music petered out and cast them apart. Baldwin’s lips parted. He yearned to tell her just how grateful he was that she’d sought him out, despite her clear position as the party’s most sought-after creature. But such words would have painted him in desperation.

Marta gave another little cursy, a cheerful giggle. Baldwin felt he could have listened to such a sound for the remainder of his life.

“Thank you for the dance. I will stop bothering you,” she said. “I dare say you and Ewan have a great deal more banter to return to.”

“Yes. How reckless of you to interrupt us,” Baldwin said. “It’s only the same sort of stale conversation we’ve had for years.”

Marta laughed and turned around. Her skirts followed after her, fluid, the fabric catching the candlelight. Baldwin’s hands fell to his sides and clenched. As she went, that wretched man, Lewis Remington, again strolled towards her. Baldwin’s heart sunk into his belly.

“There he is again. Her predator,” Ewan said. His voice was scratchy in Baldwin’s ear.

“A wretched man,” Baldwin said. His eyes remained on Lord Remington’s face as his cheeks scrunched up in laughter. Whatever they joked about, Baldwin felt sure it far out-weighed everything that had occurred between himself and Marta. She’d obviously reserved the better banter for the likes of him.

“You’ve always detested him. Now, though, there’s an extra bit of colour to your cheeks. I don’t suppose it’s proof of any sort of jealousy?” Ewan asked. His grin widened.

“Don’t be foolish, Ewan.”

“But that sort of foolishness suits me,” Ewan returned. “You know that altogether too well.”

Baldwin swallowed. “Why do you suppose your mother wishes Marta to court Lord Remington so desperately? Doesn’t she see what we do? The Regent dotes on him, but the sort of stories we’ve heard outrival any sort of positivity.”

“The reckless partying, you mean? The high life? The excess?” Ewan recited. He dug his elbow into Baldwin’s upper arm.

“You tease, but I dare say you’ve heard the same stories as myself,” Baldwin returned. “I don’t imagine him to be a worthy partner for anyone. Most certainly not for your cousin.”

“Relax, Baldwin. All they’ve done thus far is dance and speak. If Lord Remington is anything like who we assume him to be, he’ll have

forgotten all about her within five minutes of his departure this evening. Tell me you know this to be true."

Baldwin felt apprehensive about this. He felt that, in Lord Remington's shoes, he wouldn't have forgotten Marta Schnitzler at all, not for a moment.

Chapter 12

“Darling. You’re the toast of the town.”

This announcement came several mornings after the ball. Marta sat half-upright at the breakfast table, while Laura tore through a seeming pound of breakfast beans. Marta had struggled to sleep the evening before and had both palms stretched flat against her cheek. Aunt Margaret’s announcement regarding “toast” dripped through her. What on earth did it mean?

Laura was the first to ask. She swallowed down a massive gulp of beans and tapped her lips with a napkin. “The toast?”

“Oh, of course. I’ve forgotten yet again that you don’t understand a word of English,” Aunt Margaret returned, her cheeks blotching.

“She’s got rather good in just a few days,” Marta insisted. “You really must give her more credit.”

Aunt Margaret seemed disinterested in such a task. She cleared her throat once more and said, “Regardless, darling, it seems that you’ve made quite an impression across the county. This morning, you received countless invitations to some of the greatest parties of the season. Everyone feels as though their party is nothing without your appearance.”

This had been the sort of reaction Marta had enjoyed when she'd first entered the season in Austria: the belle of the ball, the favourite, the girl-near-woman who brought life and vitality to every glittering scene. For this reason, this announcement filled her with an impossible level of fatigue. She sniffed and drudged up a smile.

"That's marvellous, Aunt Margaret. Really," she said. Doubt simmered in her voice.

"I can tell how excited you truly are," Ewan said.

She shot him a dark look in return, her blonde brows furrowed. Ewan gave a half-shrug and dipped his spoon back into his beans. Aunt Margaret piled up several opened invitations across the breakfast table. With each of the letters she flashed before her, Marta felt stones grow in her stomach. Each seemed like a call to death.

"Oh! And I nearly forgot. You've received a letter from your dear mother," Aunt Margaret said. She lifted this final one to the air and fluttered it.

"I see that you've allowed Marta to open this letter on her own," Ewan said, his voice sizzling with sarcasm. "How terribly kind of you."

In truth, Marta assumed she hadn't opened it due to her excitement for the other letters. Now, Marta hurriedly tore up to grip the letter, seconds before she assumed her aunt would open it herself. Her eyes connected with Laura's, as she spoke in German, "Goodness. It's a bit like prison around here, isn't it?"

Laura, whose mouth remained glued shut with beans, only nodded. The second she swallowed back, she blurted, “Perhaps you can take it to your room?”

“You girls with your secret language,” Aunt Margaret said. She let her shoulders slump forward, as though this, beyond anything else, had defeated her. She then grumbled something about ungratefulness amid such beauty and spun back towards the hallway, seemingly disinterested in her own breakfast.

Marta couldn’t care. Not immediately—for within her hands was the first word from her homeland she’d had since her arrival. She hurried towards the staircase and hustled up towards her bedroom. When she reached it, she kicked the door closed and fell upon the top of the mattress and held the letter out before her. Her mother’s perfect, tidy, and oddly artistic handwriting stretched across the white. She could fully imagine it: her mother seated at her desk on the first floor, view of the mountains stretched out before her. She’d always been a dutiful correspondent to her homeland of England. Now, with her daughter cast out to England, she seemed willing to keep this up.

Darling Marta,

I hope this letter finds you well. Throughout the past weeks, I have struggled with our decision to send you to England. The house has felt dreadfully empty and echo-y. Recently, I called out for none other than Laura, as she is terribly good at the sort of stitch I’ve struggled with recently on a new garment, then remembered that she’d taken off across the continent with you. Our dogs seem to miss you all the more, as they spent a good deal of the past week howling at the moon. Your father seems inconsolable, although he busies himself with his friendships and his beer—such is the Austrian way.

I know that by the time this letter has reached you, you will have surely

fallen into some sort of societal scene in England. This is your way. I've always known you to be entirely sociable, the sort of girl—nay, woman—who the rest of the world is drawn to. As you sat in your bedroom throughout those weeks after the incident here in Austria, I knew that you required a fresh start—an opportunity to remember how the world truly saw you.

I know that in some very precise and surely honest ways, you hate me for what I've done to you. You're an Austrian girl, and it's a fact I've always regretted about you. I so love my home country—and I abandoned it for the love, or whatever it was at the time, of your father. I regret that it's very difficult to imagine what it's like to be a young woman again. The memories fall away from you, year by year. Perhaps I've become too jaded to truly understand your mind and your heart.

I pray that you'll remain on in England as long as you find it necessary to heal your broken heart. I wanted only to send this letter as a reminder of my deep and incessant love for you. Nothing could dismiss that. Not even the inner cruelty and darkness of my own heart, a circumstance that I pray will never happen to you. But how could it? You're the kindest and most vibrant woman I know. It seems outside the bounds of any sort of reason that I was the woman who gave birth to you.

I hope also that my dear sister hasn't put you through too much stress. Aunt Margaret means well, although I must admit, what she's done can frequently be seen through the lens of her own self-betterment. That said, even if you do perceive this, I hope you'll have a fine time laughing about it. There's really nothing else to do.

Love,

Mother

The letter had been far outside the bounds of Marta's expectations. She and her mother had never spoken so frankly. As she'd read through the various portions of the letter that discussed those lacklustre final weeks in Austria, Marta's stomach had clenched with sadness. She hated imagining herself in her mother's eyes as a crumpled-up child, the single result of a gone-wrong courtship. "A love triangle! Can you imagine anything more humiliating," had been the words of one of her once-dear friends in Austria.

Humiliating, yes. For herself, and Mother and Father, as well.

Her mother was correct. At least in England, her reputation seemed sterling. She was an exciting fresh face, a force of nature in an otherwise clear-cut society. She folded her mother's letter and returned it to the envelope, her heart lurching about in her throat. She felt a new sort of resolve.

**

That afternoon, Marta took tea with Ewan and Tatiana in the garden. Aunt Margaret was otherwise occupied.

"I'm sure she's spent the majority of the day flocking from one friend to the next to brag about the many invitations you received," Tatiana said with a sneaky smile.

"She's taken to your courting like a moth to the flame," Ewan agreed. "It seems she's completely forgotten about her only son, a single man."

“A single man who yearns only for that sort of freedom,” Tatiana said, tapping the edge of her nose with a finger.

As they sat, they could again hear the screams of Tatiana’s children, who played wildly at the edge of the woods with Laura. Tatiana clucked her tongue and whispered, “I dare say, your girl has quite a stellar way with children.”

“Only with yours,” Marta admitted.

“Perhaps I should take her away from you. Hire her as my governess,” Tatiana said mischievously.

“I cannot allow it,” Marta said with a laugh. “She’s the only person for miles around who can speak to me in German. My tongue might grow lazy otherwise.”

“Ha! You must teach us something,” Ewan said. “Perhaps we can find a meeting place. A bit of German here; a bit of English there.”

Marta paused and scrunched her face. She couldn’t imagine her cousins’ upright, uptight voices falling into the formidable syllables of her German. Luckily, just as the silence stretched strangely between them, Malcolm appeared in the garden with a bloody gash across his lower leg. Walter and Laura burst into the garden immediately after him. Large tears crept down Malcolm’s cheeks.

Laura stuttered, “I’m terribly sorry, meine Frau! Oh, mein Gott!”

Tatiana let out a staggered laugh. “It’s not your fault, Laura. Really. When you have two little boys, you have a bit of blood every single day. Don’t worry yourself.”

Marta chuckled. “What do you think of having children now, Laura?”

But it seemed that Laura had already taken with them, so much so that she wouldn’t consider abandonment. She led Malcolm into the house, muttering to him in German, words that Malcolm surely couldn’t yet understand, but words that, in their very nature, would have made any child feel comforted and loved.

“She’s terribly good,” Ewan said, just after she disappeared.

“It’s a bit the way I was when she came with me from Austria,” Marta said. “Limping along like a little lost animal.”

“I wish I had a Laura,” Ewan said. “I’m a bit like a lost lamb, myself.”

Tatiana lifted a shortbread piece into the air and studied it. In the wake of having children, she’d successfully whittled herself back down to a girlish figure, yet seemed to contemplate any and all food choices for their worth.

“When is the first party, then, Marta?” Tatiana asked. “Mother has said that it’s possible that you could double-book yourself by accident. This, I must tell you, could kill my mother. It would be the most colossal mistake. She would grovel apologetically for the next months

to whoever it was she perceived to have wronged."

"I believe it's Saturday. Correct me if I'm wrong, Ewan?" Marta said.

"I believe so, Marta. At the home of dear Baxter Peterson."

"These names. They're entirely English to my ears," Marta said brightly. "Almost as though they're taken directly from the pages of an English storybook."

"Ah! And what do you think our ears assume of the name Marta Schnitzler?" Ewan laughed. "A more ridiculous name…"

"Shush, Ewan. Marta is an Austrian girl. Her difference is part of her appeal," Tatiana affirmed.

Tatiana dismissed herself moments later to attend to her children. "I hope only that Laura hasn't fallen to the floor in defeat."

In her wake, Ewan and Marta studied one another. In Marta's perception, Ewan had regarded her a bit strangely since the party. It was as though he couldn't fully deduce what she might do next. He swallowed and flashed a playful smile once more, one that seemed almost to dare her. Marta felt entirely unclear on what, exactly, this dare was meant to be.

"The belle of the ball," Ewan said, his voice crafting a sing-song.

Marta arched her brow. “I spotted you in conversation with a few lucky women throughout the evening, didn’t I?”

Ewan gave a light shrug. He seemed almost flippant. “Just a bit of banter between friends.”

“Haven’t you any sort of interest in them?”

Ewan’s eyes sparkled. It seemed almost dangerous, asking such a question. “Let’s say that the women I encountered at our party didn’t capture my attention,” he said.

Marta was, admittedly, incredulous. The way Ewan had verbalised this made her suspicious that he had some sort of secret, a barrier between himself and the outside world. Just as she parted her lips to dig deeper, however, he shot up from his chair, brought his shoulders back, and said, “I hate to leave you alone like this, dear cousin, but I’ve a prior engagement.”

Marta’s heart lurched. It seemed clear now: her cousin yearned to abandon this conversation. They’d flown a bit too close to the sun. She watched as he sauntered out of the garden and disappeared. Marta sat, flummoxed, for a long time, until Laura reappeared in the garden with blood smeared all down her gown. She collapsed next to Marta, grabbed a piece of shortbread, and chewed on it sombrely. Her eyes were fatigued, the blue turning to a strange shade of grey.

“They’re quite exhausting,” was what she said, her words perfectly-formulated German.

“But they’ve taken to you,” Marta returned.

“Yes. Two little English boys have taken to me the way all of the county has taken to you,” she said, grinning wider. She took another tentative bite of shortbread and then grumbled, “It really does lack in any sort of flavour…”

Despite Laura’s adoption of breakfast beans, Marta couldn’t envision Laura grappling with each intricacy of the English palate.

“Your Aunt Margaret will not stop talking about it, will she?” Laura continued. “What a pleasant surprise it’s been. You, a perfect representation of the family. It seems she’s lost all hope with Ewan…”

“What do you mean?” Marta asked.

Laura gave a half-shrug. “He doesn’t seem particularly taken with courting, does he? I spotted him briefly prior to the party. He seemed overly willing to banter along with Baldwin for the long hours, rather than gossip and flirt. But of course, I hardly know him.”

Marta’s cheeks flashed red. An idea brewed up in the back of her mind, one she immediately shoved into the furthest crevices. She wouldn’t acknowledge that sort of thought.

Chapter 13

The first party of the proper season was, in fact, held at Baxter Peterson's, just as Ewan had said. Aunt Margaret ensured that Marta had a brand-new gown, the fabric light gold, and the bodice cut tight around her waist, so tight that her breasts bulged out aggressively and formidably. She joked with Laura that she'd become a woman of only breasts. Laura suggested that she sit for a sculpture session with a Greek artist. "Goodness. I dare say I won't be able to breathe by the end of the night," Marta said, gasping through her German words.

Ewan and Marta rode in the carriage to Baxter Peterson's estate. Since their strained conversation days before, they'd spent little time with one another. Marta's heart swelled as she searched for something to say, anything to quell the strange air between them.

"I don't suppose Baldwin will be a member of the crowd today?" she finally uttered.

Ewan clucked his tongue. "He usually tries his hardest to spend as much time as possible away from these sorts of affairs."

"Oh." Marta's heart sunk. "That's wretched."

"Not for him," Ewan affirmed. "He's had such a time of it, picking up the slack for his father's business. I joke that he's a fifty-something-year-old man, but in truth, he's just a young man carrying around a great deal of trauma and pain."

Marta considered this. She couldn't fully envision why Ewan felt he wanted to lend out this information. He adjusted himself on the carriage seat, one leg over the knee, and then switched back again. Perhaps he, too, thought he'd spoken too much.

When they arrived at Baxter Peterson's estate, Ewan mocked Marta for her big-eyed-wonder, her sincere shock at the grandeur of yet another home. She rolled her eyes playfully at his digs.

"I suppose it's much easier to be cynical, then, isn't it, cousin Ewan?"

"I am convinced it's the only way to live," Ewan affirmed.

When they entered, Marta felt it: proof that the words her aunt had spoken were entirely true. All eyes fell upon her; whispers seemed to cling to her name. Ewan collected them both glasses of berry wine and muttered to her, his voice joining the hubbub, "Do you have your eye on anyone this evening, dear cousin? They've all directed their eyes towards you. I believe some of the women have more of an air of anger and rage, however. I hope you're willing to take a few out the back for a bit of a fight."

Marta chuckled. "I'm meant to be a lady."

"I know you beyond that fine dress, cousin Marta. I know how much you love the air and dirt and adrenaline of a screaming match in the out-of-doors…"

“Such a silly false construction,” Marta said.

Her eyes scanned the crowd as she stood off to the side with Ewan. The orchestra seemed to consist of the same players as the previous week—their heads bowed over their strings, their fingers flying with precision. Amid a particularly overzealous song, she locked eyes with none other than Lord Remington, who seemed to tower over the rest of the onlookers and dancers. A particularly beautiful woman beside him seemed to be explaining something to him. Her smile stretched wide as she hit the climax of the tale. Still, Lord Remington seemed overtaken with Marta’s beauty, her charm. He dismissed himself from the woman beside him with a brief nod and then cut through the crowd.

Marta urged her heart to beat faster; she urged her thoughts to dance. But she felt stone-like and stoic, a direct reflection of Baldwin Terrence himself.

“Here he comes,” Ewan muttered. “Have you mentally and emotionally prepared yourself, cousin Marta?”

“You’ll embarrass me all evening long, won’t you?” Marta whispered out of the side of her mouth.

But suddenly, Lord Remington was before them. He bowed his head slightly towards both and uttered, his voice a boom, “Good evening, Lady Schnitzler. Ewan.”

“Lord Remington,” Ewan returned. If Marta wasn’t mistaken, there was a slight hiccup in his voice—proof that he lacked the appropriate regard for the Duke. He bowed his chin just a bit, yet kept his eyes upward.

It seemed almost akin to a challenge. Marta shifted uncomfortably. It seemed there was still so much beneath the surface of every English encounter, situations that her Austrian-born-and-bred mind couldn't fully deduce.

"I don't suppose I could trouble you with a dance?" Lord Remington asked. His eyes flashed about dangerously.

Marta knew that this was her lot in life. If her aunt heard tell that Lord Remington had asked her to dance and she'd refused, she didn't wish to learn of the repercussions. Her small hand found his; again, she was wrapped in his sturdy arms. He whisked her away from the sizzling sarcasm of her cousin, towards the centre of the ballroom. From there, the bright, swirling fabrics and candlelight and bite of the music crafted a sort of kaleidoscope of inventive promise and creativity. Her stomach bubbled with it. When she blinked into Lord Remington's eyes, she felt a slight jump. Perhaps this was it: the start of something.

"I must tell you that it's been a unique pleasure, finding you here at these last events," Lord Remington said. He sounded as though he'd never been unsure of a thing in his life. "Ewan and I have never known one another very well, but he seems to really have something. A bite to him. I'd love to get to know both of you." A larger, almost carnivorous smile broke out between his cheeks. "Or perhaps I only wish to know you better. But I'm willing to know Ewan as well, as I believe him to be part of the package."

"I suppose that's true," Marta admitted. Her heart felt heavy.

"Look around us, Marta," Lord Remington said then. They moved

towards the side of the ballroom, their feet tip-tapping beneath them.

“What do you mean?” Marta asked.

“All eyes are upon us. Can’t you feel them?” Lord Remington asked. “They’re terribly jealous that I’ve taken such fancy to you. But I daresay I cannot help it. I’ve known you to be special from the moment I laid eyes on you.”

The words were familiar. Marta swallowed and cast her eyes down, nearly fumbling her steps in the meantime. Her love back in Austria had said similar things, only months before ending their affair. How she’d fallen into those words back then! How she’d ached to believe them. Now, in Lord Remington’s arms, she felt faced with a similar predicament: how far was she willing to go to believe a man she hardly knew?

She wasn’t a youthful imbecile any longer. She’d been through the worst of it. She’d trained herself in the art of pessimism.

“You must believe it. Don’t you, Marta?” Lord Remington asked.

Marta flashed a pure smile. She’d only been at the ball for perhaps twenty-five minutes, and already, she yearned to grab Ewan’s elbow and drag him out, back towards the carriage, free themselves from the trauma of cultured life. She scanned the crowd as her hands broke away from Lord Remington. The song filtered out and shifted into another.

“Of course I do,” Marta said. “And I thank you for such a beautiful

dance."

Lord Remington stepped closer towards her. His lips were only a few inches from her ear, and his breath was hot and insistent. "We'll have many more. I feel sure of it, Marta. This is the start of something. I know I'm ready for it. And I'm willing to wait for you if you require a bit of time to think."

Marta's blonde brow furrowed. How desperately she wanted to scream at him: darling Lord Remington, you know little to nothing about me. Whatever tale you current spout is something of your own creation, without bounds to the reality in which I live.

But she knew that those sorts of words would only bounce off of his rather perfect, sharply-chiselled face. Thus, she smiled a final time and said, "I look forward to our future as well, Lord Remington."

Just before she cut away from him, he gripped her elbow. There was no electricity between them: just skin on skin. Marta swallowed and blinked back up to find his menacing eyes.

"You must attend an upcoming party," he began.

Marta arched her brow. "My schedule has already flung itself across the summer calendar. I dare say that I…"

"It's a party thrown by the Regent himself," the Duke continued, speaking over her syllables as though they had little value.

She supposed, in his eyes, her value was tied up entirely in her looks, in her credit, in the way she returned his gaze.

"The Regent himself," Marta echoed. She couldn't begin to explain to him just how little that sort of thing mattered to him. She hardly knew the point of a Regent, nor why she was meant to care so deeply about this invitation. But she felt the weight of it reflected in his eyes.

She understood: if she'd been another member of the ball, another woman, she would have been completely honoured with such an invitation.

"You must come," Lord Remington said. He said it as though he hadn't expected to say something like that—as though he hadn't expected to have to convince her. "I'll send you a proper invitation in the morning."

"Thank you again, Lord Remington," Marta heard herself say. "I hope to speak with you soon."

When she returned to the side of the ballroom, she spotted Ewan in the middle, his arms wrapped around a beautiful blonde. He seemed in the midst of teasing her, his eyes spitting light excitedly. Marta's stomach churned. If her aunt seemed poised to push her towards Lord Remington, and Lord Remington was perceptive to this, did this mean she would live out the rest of her days amid such banal conversations? She imagined it: long afternoons, during which Lord Remington informed her of the importance of something in English society, something she couldn't possibly care a thing about. Would that be the rest of her life? Pretending to care?

Finally, Ewan broke off from his dance and reappeared at Marta's side. He'd collected them both fresh glasses of wine.

"Your cheeks are bright pink!" Marta said playfully.

"As are yours! All that flirtation with the Duke," Ewan said.

"Ha." Marta yearned to dip into her true feelings about this strange man but wasn't entirely sure who to trust. "And who was it you danced with?"

"Her name is Audrey," Ewan said. "She seems to have taken a real interest in me, unfortunately."

"And why is that unfortunate?" Marta asked. "She is quite pretty, isn't she?"

Ewan gave a sombre shrug. "Difficult to explain, I suppose. I didn't feel a hint of a spark."

Marta explained to Ewan about the Regent's party. Ewan looked mischievous. "That's quite an invitation. The sort that many-a woman in the county craves. You're making it look all too easy."

"I can't very well go without an escort," Marta said. "Perhaps I can drag you along? If it isn't too much trouble, of course."

“Marta, know that you can drag me to any fancy party you please,” Ewan said. “You know it has all the things I love the most. Fine wine. Beautiful gowns. Beautiful people. Fresh gossip…” He sighed and rolled his eyes back, an acknowledgement of this, the most pristine of his many hours. “In fact, I thank God above for my beautiful Austrian cousin daily. For without you, it would have been quite the drab season. You’ve elevated my social calendar in nearly every way. And countless creatures approach me when I’m out in the village, hungry for any news about you.”

Marta laughed. “I suppose you tell them the truth? That I spent the majority of my days reading in the garden?”

“I would never tell such a dreadfully boring truth,” Ewan said.

“Thank you. Because of you, my image will remain intact.”

The evening continued in much the same fashion. Even as the hours drifted away, Marta was conscious that this night would blend into the others, the many balls and parties of the season, so much so that, in a year’s time, she surely wouldn’t be able to articulate what she’d worn or what she’d discussed. Lord Remington did seek her attention just once more, as though he wanted to dangle himself in front of her sparingly, a tactic, Ewan explained, that Lord Remington assumed would only increase her interest.

When he said this, Marta half-suspected that Ewan could see her innermost desires and know that they had very little to do with the Duke.

Only once throughout the rest of the evening did the two of them

discuss Baldwin Terrence. Baldwin hadn't been to the estate at all during the previous week, and Marta asked, rather tentatively, if he would be about the estate over the next. At this, Ewan gave a sombre shrug. "Baldwin is his own man. I can't begin to assume I'll know what he'll do next."

After the ball, Ewan and Marta returned to the estate in the carriage. They rode without speaking for several minutes. Marta felt herself at a loss for words, marvelling at the way it seemed England tossed her about like a doll. She could only begin to comprehend the weight of Ewan's thoughts. When the estate came into view, she turned slowly towards him and asked, her voice tentative, "What do you enjoy about the season, Ewan?"

Ewan made a strange little noise in his throat. His smile was crooked, as though he wished only to illustrate how little joy he derived from such a situation. "Thus far, I've enjoyed how little you've enjoyed it the most. Not that I take any pleasure from your disinterest or discomfort—no. That isn't what I mean. Only that you're perhaps one of the first in our society I've perceived to comprehend the frivolous nature of it all."

Chapter 14

The following afternoon, Marta sat upright in the garden beneath a sunbeam, contemplating Ewan's words from the previous evening. She hadn't had the strength or the intellect to respond; rather, she'd felt them like a warm embrace, albeit a confusing one. She felt once more that Ewan held within him a feast of secrets, ones he would never confidently tip outward for anyone else to see.

As she sat, she spotted two men on horseback. The horses swept over the crest of the moors, with their riders latched tightly to the reins and their hair whipping wildly in the wind. Marta rose and squinted to spot them: Ewan on the slower horse and Baldwin himself on the faster one. Baldwin's chin was high, his eyes alert as he cantered closer and closer. Again, her heart leapt into her throat at the sight of him. She felt that due to his stoic nature, the world gave him a disservice, perceiving him to be much less to look at than he truly was.

Of course, Marta had never been on the vain side. Looks were far from her dearest interest.

There was just something special about Baldwin.

But it wasn't as though she would ever speak these words aloud. Not to Ewan. Not to anyone.

When the men reached the gardens, their legs found the ground. Ewan called out to Baldwin, "Quite a race, hey?"

“Was it? I thought it was more of a light romp,” Baldwin said, teasing him.

“Ah! And yet again, you belittle me, dear Baldwin. I can’t imagine what my self-esteem would be if I’d never met you.”

“Altogether too confident, I’m sure,” Baldwin said.

That moment, Baldwin’s dark eyes found Marta’s through the little rusty garden gate. He stopped walking for a moment, as though he’d been struck with something. Then, he turned towards Ewan and said, “Shall we take our tea in the garden with Marta?”

Marta’s heart busied itself, seeming to wish to dance its way out of her throat and onto the ground at her feet. She couldn’t hear what Ewan said. Minutes later, however, the men appeared once more in the garden, announcing that they’d called for tea and would join her if it wouldn’t perturb her too greatly.

Ewan looked a bit annoyed at the idea, although Marta couldn’t comprehend why. To her, things had seemed strange between them since the previous evening. Perhaps Ewan felt that he’d been altogether too “open” about his feelings; that he’d given her too much of himself.

“How was your ride?” Marta asked as the three of them settled around a little garden table.

One of the maids arrived with a tray, a teapot, and a platter of shortbread. The brown, piping hot liquid churned in a perfect semi-circle, out of the pot, and into each of their little china cups. It was such a ritual, far different than what they performed in Austria. Marta knew that rather soon, she would no longer perceive this as anything bizarre. It would just be her life, any everyday event.

"It was quite good to get out across the moors again," Baldwin said. His eyes cut towards Ewan, as though he hunted for agreement.

Ewan stared into his teacup, unwilling, or unable to answer.

"Ewan arrived at my estate rather early this morning. I had a bit of work to do…"

"As he always does," Ewan asserted.

"Yes. As I always do," Baldwin affirmed. "But then, I was able to step out. And I'm so grateful to myself that I did. I feel it. The cobwebs in my head have cleared if only just the tiniest bit."

"Nothing so frivolous as our lives, hmm, Marta?" Ewan said. Again, his eyes sparkled conspiratorially.

Baldwin arched his brow. "What have you been up to, then?"

"Didn't I tell you? Marta and I attended the first ball of the season last

evening," Ewan continued. His words were strangely hard-edged, as though he used them to attack.

And assuredly, Baldwin's ears seemed to perk up, like those of a dog literally. Marta shifted in her seat and tapped her china cup back into its saucer.

"Oh. The event at Baxter Peterson's," Baldwin said. He seemed to collect the news in his brain, rolling it around to perceive its weight. "And how was that?"

"Atrocious, as usual," Ewan said. His grin widened. "Although, of course, the entire party couldn't stop its wild conversation about Marta Schnitzler."

Marta dropped her eyes. What was this strange and menacing tone with which Ewan spoke?

"I imagine so," Baldwin said. "You've given them only just a taste. And now they can hardly get enough. Like scavengers."

"But I don't imagine she'll be on the market for long," Ewan continued.

Baldwin's cheeks flashed red. "Already a suitor?"

"Don't you remember. Mother wants to suit her with the Duke himself," Ewan said.

Baldwin's expression was difficult to read. He crafted a thin-lipped smile and sipped his tea. "I see. We've known Lewis a number of years. Haven't we, Ewan?"

"Yes. A fair number," Ewan said.

Marta shifted. She yearned to express her disinterest in the Duke, that she felt herself pledged for a game she knew not how to win. Still, Ewan and Baldwin's eyes seemed to tear through her.

"Have you told Aunt Margaret?" Baldwin asked.

"I haven't yet seen her today," Marta said. Finally, a question that had a reasonable and easy answer.

"Well, we must inform her of the news," Baldwin said. "After all, it's not every day that one of our own is invited to the Regent's ball. I suppose this means Ewan is invited, as well, as it's necessary that you attend with an escort…"

"Yes. In fact, it will be a mighty time for me to exhibit my greatest fashion achievements," Ewan said. He sucked in his cheeks to make them hollow and then peered out across the garden.

The tension between the three of them was outlandish. Moments later, Marta was oddly grateful to hear the call of Aunt Margaret from the back door. She appeared, carting her skirts high, and grinned broadly

in at them. “Look at you! Beautiful, beautiful children. May I join you?”

“Aunt Margaret, it’s essential that you hear the good news,” Baldwin said. His eyes glittered ominously.

“What is it, darling?” she asked. She bustled and perched on the bench beside Marta. As she was a much larger woman, this shoved Marta to the side of the bench. A hard iron bar cut itself through her side. Marta furrowed her brow but kept her lips closed.

“I don’t suppose I should be the one to reveal such prosperous news,” Baldwin continued. “Ewan. Marta. It’s yours to tell.”

Ewan rolled his eyes slightly, illustrating to Marta alone just how bizarre he felt the scene to be. Aunt Margaret clapped her little palms together and said, “Please, tell me. I don’t think I can handle the suspense.”

“All right. Mother. Our lovely Marta has truly caught the attention of Duke Remington himself. He’s invited her to the party thrown by the Regent, in one week’s time.”

Aunt Margaret lurched up from the bench and wrapped her floppy arms around Marta’s torso. Marta felt utterly squashed. Her aunt’s squeal entered her ear and made a mockery of any sort of peaceful thought.

“That’s fantastic news! Oh, I knew you had it in you, my darling Marta. I can’t believe you two haven’t told me this until now. Only a

week to prepare! Well, with your figure, I'm certain we can find something worthy for you to wear in the coming days. Marta, say you'll come to the dressmaker's with me tomorrow. Early."

Her aunt disappeared soon after that. Marta blinked wide eyes towards Baldwin, generally shocked at his outlandish behaviour. Was it possible that he was truly so thrilled for her that he wanted to make such a show? She'd thought he'd seen her clearly enough to know that this sort of matchmaking didn't thrill her. Perhaps she'd been wrong about him.

"I hope you'll excuse me," Marta said suddenly. "I've just remembered that I have an English lesson with Laura."

The men made no motion to say goodbye to her. Both seemed to stir in their own anxious thoughts. Marta gripped her skirts and hustled through the creaky garden gate and then swept inside, up towards the library on the second floor. Once there, she fell into the corner, brought her knees to her forehead, and remained there, an utterly broken individual, until it truly was time for Laura's lesson.

Laura arrived just after four in the afternoon. As Marta had grown less and less in need of her assistance, Laura had taken to a sort of individualism that suited her, one she said she could never have discovered back in Austria, due to her duties in Marta's parents' home.

"I walked through the village today looking at everything, in each of the shops," Laura told Marta excitedly. "Nobody questioned me or even assumed I was any sort of servant. They stared at my bright blonde hair, just as they stare at yours. To them, I'm this bizarre entity, but nothing less than them. It's magnificent."

“You’ve truly taken to this world, haven’t you, Laura?” Marta said. She felt a sad smile form. Why was it she felt such desolation? Was it because of her dissatisfaction with her own existence? Was it because, in Laura finding her own freedom, Marta felt latched to another version of “societal prison”?

“Perhaps,” Laura said. “Although I’m trapped with my lack of language. Please, help me.”

Marta chuckled, grateful to have something else to consider beyond her reckless and aimless heart. She collected several sheets of paper and arranged them in front of Laura. Each had a series of nouns, verbs, and adjectives on them.

“Just like in German, the English language is constructed of a noun and a verb, generally, with adjectives arranged around them to make things interesting,” Marta began. “We’ve covered a few standard phrases in the past…”

“Like, ‘how are you,’ and ‘what is your name?’” Laura said, her eyes growing large.

“Precisely. Yes,” Marta affirmed.

Marta arranged the nouns and verbs and adjectives accordingly, to create a little sentence for Laura.

“The yellow cat jumps,” Marta recited, showing Laura the little sentence. Laura furrowed her brow and studied the words, aligning them in her mind.

“Now, you make one,” Marta said.

Laura collected the little scraps of paper, studied them, and then created her own sentence: “The brown cow eats.”

“That’s fantastic, Laura. Really,” Marta said.

She’d never envisioned the sort of joy that came with teaching. Although she’d been a remarkable pain to her tutors and governesses as a child, she hoped that the act of teaching her anything had given them some sort of solace.

As they worked, Marta perceived some sort of shadow off to the right. Her eyes swept up towards the yonder bookshelves to find Baldwin there, a book stretched out across his palm. His eyes scanned the book, although it was clear that he’d only just been peering directly at Marta.

Marta wondered if he’d made some excuse to find them there.

Although, of course, this seemed outside the bounds of reason. After all, Baldwin had seemed entirely pleased to learn of her involvement with the Duke. At least, in word alone, he’d seemed pleased. That strange colour to the air; the bizarre nature with which he’d informed her aunt—all of that contributed to a state of confusion she couldn’t fathom.

“Good afternoon again, Mr Terrence,” Marta said.

Baldwin’s eyes swept up from his book. They glittered, almost ominously. Marta’s heart bumped itself against her ribcage.

“Good evening, nearly,” Baldwin returned.

“Always there for the correction. Perhaps you should be the one teaching English,” Marta affirmed.

“I’ve never had the patience for teaching,” Baldwin said.

“Anyone could have the patience to teach Laura,” Marta said. Immediately, she translated what she and Baldwin had said to Laura, to ensure that she didn’t feel left out.

Baldwin crept closer to peer down at the fresh construction of words and adjectives and verbs Laura had crunched together. He clucked his tongue, clearly impressed with both of them. “I can’t envision the path from no language to some language. I struggled greatly with learning both French and Latin as a young man. Now, if I don’t study for many hours in a week, I feel the languages slipping through my fingers. You’re quite lucky, Marta, as you grew up with both.”

“My mother refused to speak to me in German,” Marta said with a laugh. “And my father spoke to me only in German. I can’t remember a time I didn’t have both. I used to mesmerise my friends with it back in Austria. Making up little rhymes using English instead of German. They felt that I operated from a different rule book.”

There it was again: that flicker of interest behind his eyes. Marta smiled up at him, her heart thudding. After a long, strange moment, Baldwin scratched the back of his head and lifted the book he'd found with his other hand.

"I suppose I'll leave the two of you to your work. I didn't mean to interrupt."

With that, he disappeared. Marta's eyes flickered off towards the doorway, watching him go. When they couldn't hear his footsteps any longer, Laura's fingers appeared before Marta's face. She snapped twice, then a third time. Marta hardly registered the sounds.

"Goodness, Marta," Laura said. "You're captivated with him. I haven't seen you so lovesick since…"

"Don't," Marta said. The smile smeared off her face. "I'm not captivated with him. He's only a curiosity for me. Entirely sober. Stoic. Responsible. Not the sort of man I could ever see myself with."

Laura's eyebrows rose. She muttered to herself, in sing-song German. "I would have to disagree. Sometimes, we women surprise even ourselves with what we want the most."

Chapter 15

When Baldwin reappeared outside, he found Ewan still seated in the garden, his eyes straight ahead. In all Baldwin's years of knowing Ewan, he'd never seen him look so utterly serious. Ordinarily, he was mere seconds from a joke.

What had got into him? He'd been quiet like this most of the day, since his arrival to Baldwin's estate that morning. They'd fallen into old patterns, both of them leaping atop horseback and stretching out across the moors, pausing several times to watch a bubbling brook or eat spare berries and nuts.

"Shall we go?" Baldwin asked Ewan.

Ewan nearly leapt from his skin. He blinked up at him, seemingly in shock, then returned his face to its normal composition.

"Certainly. Did you find the book you needed?"

"Yes. Thank you again."

Ewan was the sort of man who could see through nearly every situation. This left Baldwin utterly perplexed about the reasoning for why Ewan had announced Marta's beginning-courtship with none other than Lewis Remington, whom Baldwin had detested throughout much of his life. He'd said it as though he relished announcing it.

As though Ewan had longed to cause Baldwin some sort of pain.

Now, as they traced the path back toward the carriage to collect their horses, Baldwin slid his tongue across his lower lip and contemplated what to say. In truth, his current thought process brought him back to the same conclusion: he couldn't allow Marta to attend the Regent's party without him.

"Lewis is monstrous," Baldwin said suddenly. Immediately, he regretted it. Perhaps he should have started a bit lighter.

Ewan clucked his tongue. "I assumed you'd be enraged."

"Quite," Baldwin continued.

"At least it isn't you, forced to attend such an affair," Ewan continued. His eyes flashed with good humour, finally restored. "I suppose it'll be Marta and I, throughout the season, from one party to the next."

"I've done a great deal of thinking on the subject," Baldwin began, "And I would like you to bring me along."

Ewan's smile dropped. At first, Baldwin felt oddly perturbed at his own decision. But with the stakes this high, he felt he needed to take a stand.

"Marta is a free-spirited girl," he began. "A girl who can't possibly

know the sort of madness she's getting herself into. I have a feeling—nay, know for certain—that Englishmen such as Lewis and his friends are much less proper than the Austrian boys she's accustomed to. Should anyone call Lewis a gentleman, know that they're entirely incorrect."

"I assume you know all of this for a fact," Ewan said. He collected the reins of the horse together in his hand and led the enormous black mare out of the stables and into the light. Once outside, he turned to show an injured face, the eyes a bit smaller than usual.

Baldwin had always marvelled at the ease it took to injure Ewan's feelings. He normally never saw it coming until it was upon him: proof that something else was amiss between himself and Ewan.

Something that could cause Ewan to act out of uncertain jealousy.

It was nothing Baldwin would ever point out to him. He would never demand an answer. Baldwin wasn't entirely certain he could muster the courage to listen to whatever the answer would be.

No. In his mind, Ewan would only ever be a brother, a best friend. Nothing more.

He only hoped this wouldn't tear through Ewan's soul.

"I know all of this for a fact, yes," Baldwin affirmed, remembering just a few moments too late to answer. "Won't you allow me to journey with you, then?"

“Baldwin Terrence. Desirous of nothing at all in this world except for the thing he hates the most: parties. Balls.”

“I think it necessary that I attend,” Baldwin said. His voice sounded louder, more domineering. “It’s only that Marta is clearly out of her element, so far from home. It’s essential that we both take care of her. I could imagine her getting wrapped up in this strange world of English wealth, of titles, of… of other people’s expectations.”

“You feel that just because your dear friend Lewis has invited her, she’ll be taken advantage of?” Ewan asked.

Baldwin didn’t have the strength to answer. He felt a joke, lurking just beyond what Ewan spoke. Perhaps he seemed ridiculous. Perhaps Ewan only wished to point to this facet of the conversation, rather than dwell on the real topic at-hand: that which simmered in the belly of Ewan’s emotional mind.

“Of course, you can come with us,” Ewan said then. He seemed willing to backtrack, downplay the awkwardness, find a way back to normality. “As long as you dress appropriately. You know how my mother is. And who knows? Perhaps if you dress accordingly, you’ll find a woman to call your own.”

Ah. Ewan knew precisely what he was doing. Baldwin arched his brow, gave him a look of unbearable sarcasm, and said, “Perhaps. Perhaps we’ll all get what we want out of this.”

“Oh, dear Baldwin, you speak with such optimism. I can’t say that I’ve felt anything similar in many years,” Ewan returned.

Chapter 16

Ewan settled on horseback and eased into a steady clop behind Baldwin. His eyes remained sturdy and sure across Baldwin's back and upper shoulders. He wanted to know every movement, every hesitation, every breath. He'd spent the majority of his life in constant correspondence and view of Baldwin. Thusly, this fresh perspective on Baldwin's newfound— should he call it attraction?—was rather alarming.

Ewan had never imagined what it would feel like to watch Baldwin fall in love. He'd watched throughout the wretched, albeit brief, affair between Penelope and Baldwin, an entire concept that had seemed laughable at the time, if only because Baldwin had had little to no interest in the poor girl.

No. In fact, Ewan had more or less wrapped his mind completely around the idea that Baldwin would never have time for such frivolous encounters. He had pledged his undying friendship to Ewan, and there went his many hours and beautiful days, his freedom, all tied up in Ewan's time. Outside of that relationship, Baldwin had little more than meetings and schedules and propriety, and stoicism.

Ewan's responsibility, thus, had been to bring about colour and life.

Now, it was clear that Baldwin felt that colour and life elsewhere.

He'd first sensed it between Baldwin and Marta during that first encounter. Of course, at the time, Ewan had teased Baldwin about the

potential of it—dragging him to that first dinner as a sort of sport. Ewan had long-ago forced himself to face the wretched truth: that in this life, this world, he and Baldwin could never be what he so yearned for.

And it wasn't as though Baldwin wanted any such thing, either.

Ewan's hands gripped the reins still harder so that the fingers became blotchy, white and red. Baldwin's horse raced forward, flashing his perfect black curls out behind him. Baldwin turned and drew a perfect, crooked smile towards Ewan. "Are you going to ride this slowly the rest of the afternoon, then?"

Ewan chuckled. "You really don't allow for any moment of calm, do you?"

"I cannot understand it. All the hours I spent in my study, I ache to be on the moors."

Ewan rolled his eyes and cut his ankles into the sides of the horse. The horse flashed his hooves forward and back, flipping him faster across the hills. Baldwin cried out, yelling like a boy so that his voice echoed through the sky and against the yonder line of trees.

Finally, after twenty minutes of hard riding, Baldwin staggered his horse to a halt near a little pond. Ewan and Baldwin had spent a seemingly-unending number of afternoons at that pond, in various stages and seasons. Now, the sun had begun its trajectory towards the horizon, burning orange above the trees. Baldwin sneaked his fingers into the top of the water and splashed his cheeks. He again grinned at Ewan. Ewan marvelled that if he truly knew what lurked within Ewan's dark and chaotic heart, perhaps he wouldn't look at him in

such a handsome manner. Oh, but how could Baldwin possibly not know? He'd spent so many days with him, so many useless hours; he knew the inner mappings of Ewan's heart.

No. Perhaps he simply couldn't help how he looked at Ewan. Perhaps he only wanted to skate over the fact of Ewan's overwhelming love and find whatever common ground on which they both could stand.

"It's a strange thing, finding you so eager to attend the Regent's party," Ewan said. He matched Baldwin to splash water across his cheeks. His beard dribbled with it. His eyes, unable to latch onto Baldwin's dark ones a moment more, scanned the flashing orange of the sun across the pond.

"Perhaps I'm devolving," Baldwin said.

"Perhaps you're simply ready. Ready for the sort of life my mother wants for both of us," Ewan said.

Ewan could feel Baldwin's eyes studying him. He still refused to look back.

"Have you completely discounted yourself for such happiness?" Baldwin asked.

There was an element of intelligence behind the words: knowledge that the world in which Ewan lurked was far murkier than even the pond before them.

“I dare say it isn’t something for us to decide right here,” Ewan said.

“You speak in such vague terms. It’s difficult for me to perceive precisely what’s happened,” Baldwin murmured.

In the distance, several cows seemed to throw back their heads and let out humming moos across the hills. There was something strange and sad about it: two men, at the edge of some sort of beginning and ending, listening to soon-dead cows echo out their sad tidings.

“They sound so terribly sad,” Ewan whispered.

Baldwin laughed slightly. “Everything doesn’t always have to be so wretchedly sad, Ewan. I know you read a stupendous amount of poetry and thus perceive it all to be so.”

“I refuse to live in a world lacking in emotion,” Ewan countered.

Ewan allowed his shoulders to fall forward. His heart thumped about for a few moments, proof to himself that he was on the verge of saying something enormous, something a bit over the line. Something that proved that both of them could see what lurked beneath the surface of everything else.

“She really could be someone essential for you, Baldwin.”

Baldwin made a soft, strange sound from his throat.

“Perhaps it will be something of a balance. She’s far more volatile and fiery than you could ever be. And you’re balanced and clear-headed and articulate. Perhaps you could bring out the best in one another,” he continued.

He so yearned to add that he’d been that person for Baldwin for years. He so yearned to address the fact that, although Baldwin could never give him what he so required, so lusted after, he still honoured their friendship above all things. He’d never envisioned such pain to entrench itself between them. But it was something he supposed he would have to carry for a long time. Perhaps the rest of his life.

“I don’t suppose I have much to offer her,” Baldwin said softly. He seemed wistful for his own reasons, surely swimming in his own chaotic mind. “I only know the sorts of men the Regent and Lewis hang about with, and I cannot, in good conscience, allow Marta to attend the event without necessary precaution. But, Ewan, we’ll do it together. We’ll go together. We—we make an excellent team, you and I.”

“And what if we’re wrong?” Ewan asked. He arched his brow as he turned his head. His voice caught in his throat. “Suppose Marta and Lewis truly have something.”

Baldwin spread his fingers wide. “Then I suppose it’s a fact we’ll both have to live with. Perhaps we haven’t seen the full picture of both of them. There’s always a possibility that we’re entirely incorrect on all fronts. I suppose that’s simply a part of this life we must live.”

Baldwin’s words stuck in Ewan’s head for many hours after that, long after he’d paraded his horse back to the Thompson Estate and allowed

Baldwin to take his leave. Ewan returned his horse to its stall and fed and watered him, watching as the beautiful beast stabbed his nose into a vat of oats and chewed contemplatively. Just as Baldwin had said, Ewan did perceive a sadness in all things. How many times had he stood in that very spot, watching this very action, throughout his childhood and his teenage years and then later, now, his adulthood? All too soon, everything shifted around him in ways he couldn't fully perceive until much later.

At the dinner table, Ewan's mother was in a general childish uproar about Marta's invitation to the Regent's party. She ate sparingly, occasionally remembering the stew before her, dipping her fork against the meat, and then flung her head upward again to spout off another thought.

"Mother. Don't pester the poor girl any longer," Ewan said. He tried on a laugh, although it sounded false in his ears.

His mother cackled. "I'm terribly sorry, Marta. It's only that I thought I'd never have such fun again. Ewan's such a bore when it comes to courting rituals. I must write your mother yet another letter, explaining what a prosperous woman you've become in England—already!"

"Yes. What would she have done without you?" Ewan asked. He cut Marta a wry smile, and her cheeks flashed pink with embarrassment.

"It's a pity that Baldwin couldn't remain for dinner," Marta said suddenly. She tilted her head.

Ewan wondered if she could even sense the desire that stirred in her heart; it was something he found reflected in her eyes: proof that she

fell for Baldwin with each passing day.

“Our dear Baldwin is always overwhelmed with his own responsibilities,” Ewan’s mother insisted, sounding almost flippant. “And we honour him for that.”

Ordinarily, Ewan hadn’t much control over his dreams and visions. But that night, perhaps via some sort of gift from the universe, when he stretched back on his mattress, his brain poured over him visions and views of a far different reality. He swam in worlds of lust and happiness—of images made up of the beauty of Baldwin’s smile. When he awoke, he did so sadly, his movements staggered and lifeless. He appeared at the window to blink out at the sunrise, the glowing bulb reappearing over a world that would never truly feel like his.

Chapter 17

The final days before the Regent's party were a flurry of activity, of panic, and drama. It seemed that Aunt Margaret could find Marta in every nook and cranny of the house and pepper her with questions, demand that she come try a separate hairstyle or bit of make-up, anything to highlight her "glittering blue eyes," or her "beautiful figure." As the day of departure approached, Marta felt increasingly like a piece of cattle, a thing that had a use no greater than its physical form. She told this to Aunt Margaret only once, thinking that Aunt Margaret might accept the joke as fact and lighten up. In essence, however, Aunt Margaret didn't seem to understand the joke at all and instead offered, "Cows do have the most beautiful eyes, as you do, don't they?" At this, Ewan stifled a laugh.

Although things had been momentarily bizarre between Marta and Ewan—for reasons she wasn't entirely clear on—things seemed patched by the time of the Regent's party. This led to Ewan hustling into Marta's bedroom almost continually while he prepared, asking her opinion about his various fashion choices, including how he styled his hair. Marta giggled throughout, his stomach spasming painfully. She'd never met anyone like Ewan and took unique pleasure in his ability to make anything just a little brighter, a little more playful. Yet again, she marvelled that he'd ever been such dear friends with Baldwin.

The fact that Baldwin would come with them to the party wasn't announced to her until she and Ewan were safely tucked away in the carriage. Marta's lips parted in confusion, and her heart jumped into her throat.

"Why does Baldwin wish to attend?" she asked. She attempted to keep her voice as even as possible, hopingto convince both herself and

Ewan that she felt very little, close to nothing at all, for Baldwin. “I thought that he wasn’t entirely fond of these sorts of events.”

Ewan clucked his tongue. “He has found reason to care about this particular event, it seems.”

“I see.”

Marta and her Aunt Margaret had chosen a light pink gown: again cut low over her breasts, cinched tight at her waist, with a mighty gown that bounced out from her hips and danced across the ground. Ewan assisted Marta from the carriage towards the Regent’s ballroom. As they walked, Marta felt entirely on display. Other party-goers and revellers walked slowly alongside them, their eyes scanning her breasts, her bodice, and her fine shoulders and bouncing blonde curls. She knew, still, that she was something of a different specimen. The Austrian woman. The one who’d captured the fancy of the Duke himself.

As Ewan and Marta approached the main staircase, which led up from the garden and towards the glowing ballroom, a red-headed woman approached and veered towards them. Marta thought that perhaps she recognised her from a previous party. Moments before she nabbed them, Ewan whispered, “Penelope Sussel. She briefly courted Baldwin.”

Marta’s heart felt drenched in stomach acid. Penelope curtsied perfectly, tilting her head so that the candlelight from within the ballroom danced across the red curls. “Good evening, Ewan! And Marta, I don’t believe we’ve had the opportunity to be introduced.”

“Marta, let me introduce Penelope Sussel,” Ewan said. He’d turned on

his tremendous amount of charm, and his voice boomed out across the garden.

"Good evening, Penelope. So glad to know that Ewan and I have someone to chat with at this seemingly outrageous event," Marta said. Still, her heart bumped about in jealousy. Why had she and Baldwin ended things? Was it possible that she still had her eyes upon him? And if so, was it possible that a fresh meeting that night, at the Regent's ball, would be reason enough to try again?

"And Baldwin? I've just spotted him inside the ballroom itself. I couldn't have envisioned him at such an event, even a year or so ago. Remarkable. Perhaps he's changed for the better," Penelope said.

"If you perceive 'bettering' to involve reckless drinking and frivolous dancing, I suppose," Marta said.

Penelope laughed. The sound of it was strangely cruel. "And here I assumed you were some sort of reckless party girl yourself."

"Perhaps. In Austria," Marta returned. Her voice was much harder than she'd ever heard it.

The three of them marched up the steps and entered the ballroom. Already, Marta had grown accustomed to the pomp and circumstance of such events. A larger orchestra perched towards the corner, casting a spell of music, wave after wave, across the rapt audience. They were the conductors of the evening's mood. Women highlighted their gorgeous curls, their round breasts, their magnanimous laughter, standing with their backs arched before whichever man they'd chosen for the night. Towards the table of drinks, Baldwin stood in all his glory: domineering and stoic, his black eyes scanning and catching

everything throughout the audience. It didn't take him long to recognise that Marta had entered. His eyes latched onto hers for a long time before he shifted, changing his face slightly—was that a smile?—and heading in their direction. En route, he noticed Penelope between Ewan and Marta and stumbled for a moment.

It seemed clear that he wasn't entirely pleased about her appearance. Penelope struck forward, turning her shoulders this way and that, and spouted, "Good evening, Baldwin. I was just telling Ewan and Marta that I could never have envisioned you attending such an event."

Baldwin arched his brow dangerously. He nodded and said, "Good evening to you, as well, Penelope."

Marta felt her skin grow cold. She turned her eyes towards Ewan, unclear on what to do next. Before she could verbalise any sort of greeting, however, Duke Remington swept through the crowd. He was nearly as tall as Baldwin, and several inches higher than the majority of the men he passed. Marta's eyes found him swiftly. She further heard the hushed whispers, the excitement, the intrigue. It was clear that the vibrant world of this year's season buzzed with news about the Duke's sudden desire for the half-Austrian.

Again, Duke Remington looked altogether handsome, if a bit banally so. He bowed in greeting and said, "Good evening, Fraulein. It's marvellous to see you again. I'm so grateful that you decided to make an appearance at this humble gathering."

"Humble is quite a word to use to describe it," Marta said.

The Duke grinned almost evilly. "Perhaps."

Baldwin's eyes seemed ferocious, menacing. Marta turned her eyes towards his and frowned, attempting to read his expression. But before she could speak, the Duke uttered, "Good evening to you as well, Baldwin. It's been far too long since we had the opportunity to speak."

"Far too long. Yes," Baldwin returned.

"Perhaps we can catch up a bit after this. In the meantime, however, I'd like to take Marta across the dance floor. Won't you dance with me, Marta? Make the entire party jealous of me," the Duke said.

The music swelled, an indication that it was time. Marta felt Baldwin and Ewan's eyes upon her. She couldn't say no; after all, the Duke had been the one to extend the invitation. She slid her hand into his and felt his large hand at the base of her back. This was every girl's fantasy: the colour, the light, the handsome and powerful man who beamed down at her, eager to have her all to himself.

Yet she felt eternally as though she was guided away from the man she truly wanted.

"It's a fine party," Marta said. She forced her voice to brighten. If only for her aunt alone, she resolved herself to be flirtatious, sure.

"You would hope so. It is the Regent's party, after all," the Duke said. He sounded outrageous, arrogant. He beamed at her and flashed his teeth.

“I don’t believe I’ve met the Regent,” Marta returned. “Can you point him out to me?”

Duke Remington arched his brow. “I assumed everyone knew who he was. One of the more important men in the surrounding area.”

“Yes, but you must remember: I’ve only just arrived,” Marta said.

“I’ll allow you a pass, then,” the Duke said. “He’s just there, dancing with that particularly beautiful blonde. Not as beautiful as you are, of course…”

Marta found them immediately. The blonde looked surly, her eyebrows a bit too high, and her smile pinched and cruel.

“I suppose that’s his wife,” Marta said.

“In fact, she is,” the Duke said. “A strange thing, in fact. Ordinarily, he plots and schemes his way to dancing with as many women who aren’t his wife as possible.”

Marta’s stomach flipped. “I suppose that’s the way of powerful men.”

“You speak as though you have a real handle on the qualities of powerful men,” Duke Remington said.

“A woman who dances with the likes of you had better comprehend what she’s getting herself into, don’t you think?” Marta said.

Although she danced on dangerous ground, the Duke seemed to appreciate her cleverness. When he finished his raucous laughter, he said, “Tell me, Marta. What on earth do you see in that wretched Baldwin Terrence?”

Marta was surprised. She hadn’t assumed that the Duke had taken any notice in her whereabouts, who she spoke with, what she did. She cut her eyes over his shoulder to see that Baldwin was in the midst of a heavy conversation with Ewan. Did they really never run out of anything to talk about?

“Why are you so curious about my relation to Baldwin Terrence?” Marta asked.

Again, the Duke laughed. “You’re always keen to be clever, rather than respond to my questions. I suppose I respect that. I see something of myself in you.”

Marta didn’t perceive this to be any sort of compliment, although she flashed a bright smile in response. Her heart hammered with distrust.

“Baldwin Terrence is only a dear friend of my cousin Ewan,” she said. “They’ve been friends for years. In fact, I first met Baldwin when I was just a girl. Twelve years old, I believe.”

This seemed to loosen the Duke a bit. “So you wouldn’t say you spend

any time with him purposefully."

"It seems that the majority of my life thus far this year has been without purpose," Marta said. "My arrival to England, in and of itself, was due to my mother's wishes."

"You're a bit of a pawn. Allowing everyone else to move you about," the Duke said.

Marta arched her brow, feeling dangerous, powerful. "I suppose you believe yourself to be one of those playing the game."

The Duke laughed as the song came to a close. Marta's hands lowered to her sides. The Duke swept his hand to her lower back once more and guided her towards the far side of the crowd. It felt rather ominous that he hadn't yet answered what she'd said, as though this was an affirmation of her deepest fears.

When they reached the corner of the room, the Regent and his surly, blonde wife awaited them. Introductions were made. Immediately, the Regent said, "I've made up my mind, Miss Schnitzler. You and I will dance together before the evening is finished." At this, his wife's eyes cast out towards the far end of the room. Marta had the strangest suspicion that both the Regent and his wife had lustful eyes for others and perhaps no real love for one another. In any case, his wife didn't seem to care at all that the Regent had just pledged to dance with her.

"I'm not quite finished with her," the Duke said. His finger traced down her arm and towards her hand. As the Regent said something else to his wife, the Duke's lips dropped towards Marta's ear. "You're the softest thing I've ever touched."

Marta detested this. She lurched a bit to the side, yet ensured her face remained stoic so that she didn't show just how much she'd just grown to resent this man. Still, she knew this wasn't a world she was entirely accustomed to.

"I wish to show you something else, Marta," the Duke said. It was clear, now, that the Regent and his wife had long-since forgotten them. The Duke pressed his hand at her lower back once more and guided her towards a dark hallway, just beside the corner in which they stood.

Marta understood the weight of this request. She understood what men like Lewis Remington did in dark corners, regardless of their title or wealth or family name. It was the same everywhere. She smiled wide and stalled. "I would love to see whatever it is you have hidden back there, My Lord, but I really must return to my cousin. You see, he's had a bit of a time recently. Troubles with a woman."

The Duke arched his brow. "Troubles with a woman? Ewan Thompson? I find that difficult to believe."

"And yet, it's true. I tell you this in deep confidence. You mustn't spread it around," Marta said, her voice low.

"Already, you're lending me precious information about your family! This alone puts me in good spirits, lovely Marta," the Duke said, his voice boisterous. "I will come to find you shortly. Don't dally with your cousin for long."

Marta escaped his grip, her heart fluttering with panic. She swept out

from the corner, swiped past the Regent and his wife, and tumbled towards the drink table. She knew she'd narrowly avoided some sort of wretched situation—the Duke's hand across her breasts, perhaps—and wanted to knock back a glass of berry wine or four before proceeding. When she reached the table, she drank the glass far too quickly with her eyes closed. When she tapped the glass back down before her for a refill, she found herself face-to-face with Baldwin Terrence.

Ewan was no longer anywhere to be seen.

Baldwin didn't look pleased. His cheeks were sallow, and his eyes glittered menacingly. He poured her second glass and then poured himself one. Over the table, they clinked glasses. At that moment, Marta felt as though the crowd around them disappeared. She could have fallen into the depths of his dark eyes. She could have abandoned this world completely.

"You look as though you need that," Baldwin said.

Marta felt a blush creep across her cheeks. She forced herself to drop her eyes. "I suppose tonight hasn't been what I planned for."

"Did you have an orchestrated mission?" Baldwin asked.

"Don't be foolish. I only hoped to perform whatever task my aunt has for me."

"And that task, I suppose, is … woe the Duke himself," Baldwin said.

“It’s not as though I have many options in this life. I’m just a woman. I must do whatever the world tells me to do. *Marta, find a husband. No, not that one. Oh, dear, well, what about England? Yes, go to England. Immediately. No, you cannot have time to say goodbye to your friends or hike through the mountains a final time. No.* And now that I’m here, another has taken up these commands. It’s rather pathetic, isn’t it? I suppose you think that were you in my shoes, you wouldn’t allow such things to occur.”

Baldwin studied her for a long moment. Amid it, another girl lunged to the side of Marta, stabbing her elbow into her side and forcing her away from the table. The girl gave her a dagger-eyed look, one that sent Marta to the far end of the table and then into the corner. Baldwin followed after her, a broad grin across his lips.

“I imagine that many of the women here aren’t exactly fond of you,” Baldwin said.

“Why on earth not? I haven’t spoken to many of them!”

“Come now. Duke Remington, who has the ear of the Regent himself, invited you and danced with you the moment you arrived. You’re hardly weathered in the world of English society, and already you’ve mastered it.”

“What I would give to trade my position with theirs!” Marta said. Admittedly, the words were accidental, yet filled with truth.

“Whatever do you mean?” Baldwin asked.

“Only that the Duke doesn’t seem to be the most pleasant of men,” Marta said hurriedly. She didn’t wish to dip into the fact that the Duke had very little respect for Baldwin.

“We’ve never seen eye-to-eye,” Baldwin admitted, as though he could peer directly through her mind.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Marta said. “Aunt Margaret wouldn’t match me with someone with any ill will.”

“There’s so much Aunt Margaret cannot understand about today’s society,” Baldwin affirmed. “She’s from a different time. The seasons shift everything.”

“But she’s assuredly already written my mother to announce her pairing with me and the Duke himself,” Marta said. “To be frank, the idea of pleasing both my aunt and my mother at once makes me feel as though all my horrendous actions and dispiriting situations from the previous year could be forgotten.”

“Is that enough of a reason to marry such a wretched man?” Baldwin asked.

“I don’t suppose he has any sort of engagement plans for the evening,” Marta said with a light laugh. “Please, don’t worry away the rest of my existence.”

“If you have these worries yourself, Ewan and I can whisk you away

from here this moment," Baldwin said, his voice conspiratorial and low, hardly heard over the swell of the orchestra.

"And where has dear Ewan escaped to?" Marta asked.

"I can find him swiftly," Baldwin affirmed. "I always can."

Marta arched her brow contemplatively. It was strangely alluring, the idea of escaping the wretched Regent's party and whisking out into the dark summer night. But of course, this very well could incite gossip, and it wouldn't necessarily put her in good light.

Suddenly, Ewan appeared beside them. He was red-cheeked and boisterous, far more like the younger boy Marta remembered from seven years before. "What sort of secrets are the two of you exchanging?"

Marta laughed. "Nothing of interest, I'm sure."

"You'd best be careful, you know," Ewan said. "I was out dancing with dear Penelope…"

"Oh?" Baldwin said, incredulous.

"Don't be so jealous, Baldwin."

“I dare say I’m not jealous,” Baldwin said. “Only surprised that you can stand her for longer than five minutes.”

“That was a rather swift dance, to be sure,” Ewan continued. “Anyway. While dancing, I spotted the Duke speaking with the Regent. Their eyes were directed toward the pair of you, and they looked rather menacing.”

Marta so yearned to roll her eyes back in her skull.

“I’ve just asked her if she wants us to hustle her out of here, without another word,” Baldwin said, his eyes shining.

“As much as I love the idea of it, I feel that it would be a disservice to your mother,” Marta added.

“Admittedly, it may destroy her,” Ewan said. “She speaks about it incessantly, even when you’re not around. My father knows the intricacies of your love life, regardless of if he wants to or not.”

Marta laughed, grateful to have the two of them there beside her as a sort of calm in the storm. Together, they drank the rest of the glasses of wine and gossiped about the surrounding crowd, almost as though they were alone in the room. They hardly bothered with anyone else for the next half-hour. Throughout, Marta genuinely considered embarking into the night once more. After all, it seemed they’d stayed at the party a decent amount of time; she’d danced with the Duke exactly once, which was reasonable, and furthermore, she felt exhausted already after two and a half glasses of wine.

But of course, she should have known better than to pray for that kind of ease. Moments later, Duke Remington appeared before the three of them and interjected himself, even though Ewan was telling a joke. The Duke cleared his throat and recited, “You’re always acting as the jester, aren’t you, dear Ewan?”

All three faces smeared into frowns. Marta crossed her arms over her chest and blinked up at the Duke, who seemed to grow less and less handsome as the minutes progressed.

“Marta. Could I borrow you for a moment?” the Duke said. This time, his voice boomed out across the crowd and caused several faces to spin towards them.

It was clear that if Marta didn’t go with the Duke, he was prepared to make some sort of scene. The conversation in the little groups around them completely died. Baldwin’s eyes again bore through her. But what was she to do? She was a newcomer, a nearly-foreigner, there at the strange estate of the Regent. She forced her best and most beautiful smile and stepped towards the Duke. “Whatever is the trouble?” she asked.

Suddenly, a song swung up from the orchestra. Seconds later, she was again wrapped in the Duke’s arms and whisked about the dance floor. Her feet struggled to keep time, as anxiety flung itself through her, making her heart bump harder, wilder. Still, the Duke hadn’t said what he’d apparently taken her away to say. It seemed he wanted to put her through some kind of panicked silence.

“The suspense is killing me,” Marta said finally, her smile still wide, yet hurting her cheeks with its falseness.

“I suppose I assumed you’d understand why I took you away from them,” the Duke said. His voice was formidable, like a brick wall formed between them.

“I’ve told you before. Ewan is my cousin, and his friend Baldwin is nothing more than…”

“Don’t lie to me,” the Duke countered. “I spotted you there with Baldwin long before Ewan arrived.”

“It’s only a party, My Lord,” Marta returned. “I make polite conversation. It’s what we do in Austria. I assumed it’s also something of a tradition here, as well.”

“Don’t spite me,” the Duke said. His grip on her back tightened, then loosened again. He swallowed and added, “I’m terribly sorry. I don’t mean to be so … Well. I just cannot imagine a world in which you’d rather spend any of your time with the likes of Baldwin Terrence rather than myself.”

The jealousy disgusted Marta. She hardly knew this man, and already, he seemed to have decided to spout some sort of ownership over her. It was too recent after her horrible love-triangle back in Austria; she felt far too damaged to put up with the likes of it.

“He disapproves of the Regent, Marta,” the Duke continued, as though anything he said might alter the course of her mind. “He’s straight-laced and dull, and he has nothing of interest to bring to any table.”

“You forbid me to speak to him, then?” Marta asked. She clucked her

tongue, almost pleased that she'd discovered such a wretched hole in the Duke's plot to have her.

"Perhaps. Yes. It's nothing against you, darling; only that I feel you don't recognise what's good for you in this English world. You're a foreigner. But you don't have to be, not for long."

"And I thought something you appreciated most about me was the fact that I knew nothing of this world?" Marta returned. "But what good am I to you if I have no real interest in this lacklustre world of traditions?"

On cue, the music subsided. In the corner, the men in the orchestra shifted on their chairs, seemingly growing impatient and uncomfortable. Marta dropped her hand from his sweaty one and curtsied plainly. "Thank you again for the dance, My Lord," she offered cooly. "Terribly sorry if it wasn't English enough for you."

Marta scampered off the dance floor, eager to find Ewan and Baldwin once more. But as she raced, the crowd around her dispersed and grew quiet once more. By the time she reached the edge of the crowd, she realised that the Duke had decided to chase after her. The moment she turned back, the Duke nearly stumbled into her. His eyes were delirious-looking, as though he'd had far too much to drink. This time, he leered at her and moved his lips rather close to hers, so that she could inhale the stench of something strong--perhaps Scotch.

"Get away from me," Marta hissed, just loud enough for him to hear her.

His eyes glittered ominously.

“You’re disgusting to me. I don’t wish to see you again. Ever.”

But this wasn’t the sort of response the Duke was accustomed to. Suddenly, enraged, he reached out and grabbed her elbow hard, so that his thumb and first finger created immediate bruises. Marta cried out and tugged hard, attempting to run towards the door. She hadn’t a clue what she might do in the wake of her run. Grab a random horse? Escape into the night?

“Please. Just let me go. We don’t have to discuss this anymore. It can just be…”

But the Duke wouldn’t allow it. He flashed his white teeth and muttered, “One more dance, my beautiful Austrian. And then we’ll flee into the back corners. I’ll make you forget that silly Austrian language of yours. I’ll make you forget even your own name.”

The words were overwhelmingly frightening. Tears spouted to her eyes. But just when she’d resolved that she very well might have to go along with him, due to his strength and his watchful eyes and his profound grip, Baldwin appeared to her right. His large hand wrapped tight around the Duke’s bicep and tore his hand away from her. Then, discreetly, he smashed his opposite fist directly into the Duke’s stomach. The Duke coughed and staggered back, in complete shock.

Before Marta could fully react, Baldwin grabbed her hand and tugged her out after him, snaking through the crowd and into the dark night. Outside, Ewan awaited them, his hands on his cheeks. “My God,” he muttered, again and again. “He is going to kill you.”

But Baldwin seemed cool, calm. He turned swiftly towards Marta and gripped her shoulders. “Tell me you’re all right. Tell me he didn’t hurt you.”

Marta remained in shock. She fumbled for words and then wrapped her hands around his and brought them towards her lips. She so yearned to kiss them but stopped herself just in time.

“I’m okay. I’m going to be okay,” she whispered. “Let’s go home as soon as we can? Please.”

Neither Baldwin nor Ewan spoke as they marched back to the carriage. Once inside, Marta’s head collapsed onto Baldwin’s chest. Ewan stared straight ahead, muttering to himself. Baldwin raised his hand over Marta’s back and stroked her lovingly, just out of sight of Ewan. Marta marvelled at how wonderful it felt to be touched in this way, only so recently after being touched in such a horrendous and provocative way.

“I hate him,” Ewan muttered. “I always have, and now I have still more of a reason to…”

“He was quite drunk,” Marta admitted. “I suppose he hadn’t a true understanding of what he did.”

“That’s nonsense, and you know it,” Baldwin said.

“I don’t mean to speak in such a way. I only wish it hadn’t happened,” Marta said. She glanced up from his chest and frowned, suddenly conscious of what she’d done. She shifted away from Baldwin’s body

and placed her hands in her lap. She stared straight ahead throughout the rest of the ride.

With everything in her, she craved Austria. She clenched her eyes shut and prayed to open them to see the mountains again. She so yearned to open her lips and speak Deutsch, to hear reason from strong Austrian minds. In a softer sense, she still felt the last whispers of love she'd had for her lost one and ached with misery. How far she felt from the life she'd wanted to build for herself!

Once back at home, Ewan invited Baldwin inside for a nightcap. Uncle Everett and Aunt Margaret had long-since gone to bed, and the house shifted strangely in the summer wind, as though it creaked with lost souls and ghosts. Marta felt akin to one of these ghosts: unclear on her purpose, yet yearning to howl throughout the night.

"I suppose you'll stay with us tonight," Ewan said as he poured three glasses of Scotch. "No use riding home so late at night." Ewan scratched the back of his head and said, "How was it you came to the ball tonight? You didn't journey with us."

"I happened to have a meeting with another gentleman in attendance a few hours before," Baldwin affirmed. "He offered to take me along to discuss more details of the business arrangement."

"Good. I almost suspected that your horse remained at the estate," Ewan said. In typical Ewan fashion, he seemed to yearn to make some sort of joke. "Imagine what sort of chaos that would be! Sneaking back to retrieve it."

Neither Baldwin nor Marta seemed able to muster the strength to laugh or add to it. Ewan cleared his throat and said, "Perhaps we

could craft some sort of design for you. Marta, you could stand on the front porch and howl at the sky. I could perform a jig in the stables themselves to distract."

"It's a sad state of things, isn't it?" Marta said. "That you were never in any sort of law enforcement. You really do have the most prosperous ideas."

Ewan cut them a sterling smile. Was it possible that the three of them could move forward from that night without malice or discontent? Marta snuck her lips over the edge of her Scotch glass and inhaled a tiny bit too much, casting the burning liquid across the back of her tongue. She allowed her shoulders to slump. For the first time all evening, she felt altogether ridiculous in the massive gown, which she'd donned to attract the attention of that horrendous man.

"I think perhaps it's time for me to sleep," she said. She wanted nothing more than to abandon her thoughts, to dive into whatever darkness awaited her.

But as she walked towards the doorway, Baldwin's eyes again captured her. She swallowed and waited for a long moment. Perhaps he would say precisely what she needed to hear, whatever that was. Silence stretched between them. Ewan's eyes scanned from her face back towards Baldwin's.

"Good night," Ewan finally sputtered, clearly confused.

"Good night," Marta echoed.

Chapter 18

Baldwin stared down into his glass of Scotch, listening as Marta made her way towards her bedroom upstairs. Her footsteps were soft, delicate, and he felt strangely as though he could sense the darkness of her beating heart. Her sadness had certainly seemed to stretch over her, coating her like a cloak. He felt enraged at both himself and Lewis Remington. He hadn't done enough.

Ewan, to his credit, didn't speak for several minutes. The men knew one another too well for that. Ewan surely recognised the chaotic churnings of Baldwin's thoughts and knew better than to dip in too early, yet it was essential to halt the wild stirrings soon, in order to calm him.

"Marta doesn't understand this world," Baldwin murmured, mostly to himself.

"Although I dare say she understands far better than Lord Remington thinks," Ewan interjected.

"Do you suppose?" Baldwin asked.

"The girl is no child," Ewan said. "I told you. The events that transpired back in Austria led her here with a broken heart and a deeper comprehension of the world. I dare say what occurred at the Regent's ball is something of a mainstay for her. Perhaps she crafts gossip and drama wherever she goes. This is not to say I don't appreciate a good bit of gossip and drama."

“If anything, you should thank her for adding a bit of light to your life,” Baldwin agreed.

The men shared a laugh. Baldwin drank the rest of his Scotch and returned his eyes to Ewan’s. There was a great deal that had remained unsaid between them. Baldwin’s heart dipped low in his chest.

“You had an all right time before we had to leave, didn’t you?” Baldwin asked.

Ewan gave a lacklustre shrug. “It’s never boring. Especially this time. But I suppose the county will be up in arms about you. You stole the Duke’s lady from under his grip.”

“And punched him in the gut…” Baldwin dropped his face into his palm, remembering it. The Duke’s stomach had been hard as a rock, powerful, yet he’d felt him spasm in pain the moment Baldwin’s fist had connected with his muscle.

“I dare say he won’t go on about that,” Ewan affirmed. “If nobody else noticed, the Duke won’t wish to spread the news around.”

“I suppose not,” Baldwin agreed. “It might make him look weak.”

“And our dear Duke is never weak,” Ewan said with a wink.

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Upstairs, Ewan collapsed in the guest bedroom, atop the mattress that, if he wasn't incorrect, had begun to stitch itself around his body years ago. This fact made the mattress far more his than any other guest's. In every way except title, this bedroom was his bedroom.

But sleeping at the Thompson Estate was far different than it had been prior to Marta's arrival. Now, he felt he could feel her still a few doors down. Had she collapsed into slumber immediately? Or had the events of the night wrapped tightly around her frame and caused her panic and unrest? He thought back to what Ewan had said about her history. Yes, truly, she was adventurous and wild and free, the sort to have multiple stories such as this. But there was also something else about her, something softer and kinder and more emotional. It didn't seem likely that she could just brush this off.

Regardless, Baldwin couldn't turn his mind from a seemingly-pure fact: he was falling in love with her. His mind called out to her, even as he tossed and turned on this, his mattress. He remembered the heaviness of her head across his chest on the carriage ride home. He'd longed to spread his fingers across her hair and kiss away all tears, had she shed them. Although he would never be the one to shoo Ewan away, he'd longed for privacy at that moment.

Of course, yet again, he wasn't entirely sure what Marta thought of the entire affair. Surely, she looked at him as more than just a friend of her cousin's. She'd sought him out throughout the rockiest of encounters with the Duke himself. And when the Duke had attempted to hurt her, Baldwin had been the one to step in. He'd known it to be his duty.

Somehow, he felt linked to Marta. Somehow, he felt he owed it to her

to protect her from such wretched men.

But it was even difficult for himself to explain it in his own mind.

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Baldwin struggled to sleep that night. When he awoke in the morning, he dressed slowly and spread the curtains to peer out at an early summer morning. He'd always been rather good at guessing the time, and he assumed that it was no later than 7:45. When he appeared in the hallway, he was surprised to find Laura, the Austrian maid, entering Marta's bedroom several doors down. As she turned the doorknob, her blue eyes connected with his. She looked as though she'd been caught doing something she felt she wasn't supposed to do.

In response, however, Baldwin gave her a light-hearted smile. "It's all right. I don't know the rules."

Of course, Laura hadn't a clue what he'd said. She returned a shrug and then crept the rest of the way into the bedroom. Just before the door closed, Baldwin's ears sought out syllables from Marta.

She spoke in German to Laura, and the words shimmered with vitality and friendliness. They struck Baldwin with their beauty, so much so that he felt frozen for a moment before forcing himself the rest of the way to the staircase.

Breakfast wouldn't be served for another hour. This left Baldwin a good deal of time to roam through the gardens and walk towards the forest. Throughout his life, he'd frequently taken to walking as a

means to restructure and order his thoughts.

In truth, Baldwin felt moderately frightened about what the Duke might decide to do about him. For many years, the two of them hadn't seen eye-to-eye. Now, the Duke had the ear of the Regent, a great deal of power, and, furthermore, interest in Marta Schnitzler. This was a recipe for sure disaster.

Yet, despite his best efforts, Baldwin was something of a romantic when it came to Marta. He found a sort of resolve within him. He would fight for her, no matter what he had to do. She was worthevery effort.

Back inside, Baldwin almost immediately fell in line with Aunt Margaret, who hadn't yet smeared the rest of her make-up across her face. She looked exhausted, her cheeks sagging, her lips pale and undone. She chirped his name. "Baldwin! My goodness. I didn't know that you'd spend the evening with us."

"I hope you don't mind, Auntie," Baldwin said. He tugged up a playful smile.

"Oh, of course not. Of course not," Aunt Margaret said. She seemed almost flustered. "I haven't yet seen Ewan or Marta to know more about the events that transpired last evening. I suppose the three of you will update me over breakfast?"

Baldwin agreed. His heart hammered as he approached the breakfast table. Upstairs, he heard Ewan teasing Marta about something, something he couldn't fully articulate. The moment he reached the breakfast table, the door burst open in the foyer to reveal Tatiana and her children. The butler looked flabbergasted and said, "We didn't

expect you!" But of course, Tatiana didn't seem to care. She hurried down the hallway and greeted Baldwin excitedly.

"My husband is away on business yet again, and I just couldn't manage to sit with them all day again. Besides, Laura has been such a dream with them."

Baldwin smiled as the boys scampered back towards the far end of the house, far from the steaming breakfast platters. Incredulous, he glanced at Tatiana and said, "Where are they off to?"

"They've discovered where Laura's bedroom is and have taken it upon themselves to find her," Tatiana said.

Baldwin remembered that he'd seen Laura enter Marta's bedroom only an hour before. Perhaps she'd already returned to her bedroom in the servants' quarters. His eyes scanned up towards the staircase to spot Marta and Ewan approaching, both of their faces light and shining, seemingly joyful after a pleasant night's sleep. Baldwin was momentarily envious about this fact.

"Good morning, Tatiana!" Marta called. She tapped a kiss on her cousin's cheek. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"The boys cannot get enough of your maid," Tatiana said. "The girl is the only thing they talk about. I even caught them exchanging German words with one another the other day. A secret language! I don't know what to do with them. I don't know what sort of wretched God gave me two sons."

“Well, Laura does very little but talk about them,” Marta said. She beamed, then turned her eyes towards Baldwin. Memories of the previous evening seemed to exist in the space between them. She dropped her eyes almost instantly.

Baldwin wondered if whatever lust had brewed between them was now dismissed, due to the awkwardness of his punching the Duke in the stomach.

He wondered if he’d lost his chance.

“Shall we eat, then? The boys will scrounge up whatever they can in the kitchen with Laura, like always,” Tatiana said. “Oh, Mother, there you are…”

Aunt Margaret appeared in the dining room, her face properly put-up, now, only a few moments after Baldwin had first seen her. Aunt Margaret placed a kiss on her daughter’s forehead, an act that resulted in a bright pink blotch across her skin. Immediately, Marta brought a napkin across Tatiana’s forehead and tapped it out. She lent a wink.

“The silence is deafening, my children,” Aunt Margaret said. “I require the news of the evening! I wanted to stay up the rest of the night and catch you when you came in, but, admittedly, your Uncle Everett discovered me fast asleep in the parlour and convinced me to go to bed.”

Marta chuckled. Her eyes flashed towards Ewan, as though she wanted to urge him to tell the story. Baldwin knew that they had to dance around the topic athand if only to assuage Aunt Margaret.

“It was beautiful,” he suddenly said. Even in his own ears, the words sounded false.

“Beautiful, hmm?” Marta asked. “Is that how you would describe it, Ewan?”

“Perhaps,” Ewan said. He mocked her thoughtfulness. “Beautiful and… what is this other word I might use… rich. Yes. Quite rich.”

“Oh, marvellous,” Aunt Margaret returned.

“Quite,” Ewan said, nodding.

“Many guests?” Aunt Margaret asked. She stabbed a fork and knife through a little sausage but kept her eyes on her son.

“Oh, yes. You’d be surprised how many people the Regent can bring to a ball like that,” Ewan said. Again, his words simmered with sarcasm.

At this, his mother stopped her rapid sausage slicing. “Whatever do you mean? Of course a Regent would bring in a wide variety of people. He’s quite important. Or don’t you remember, Ewan?” She cast her eyes towards Tatiana and mumbled, “He really is so forgetful these days. I imagine it’s all that late-night Scotch drinking. Your father lost his memory in the same way. He hardly knows what day it is. And only now, I tried to convince him to come to breakfast … and he told me it wasn’t yet time!”

The table laughed. Ewan stuttered as he explained he was only kidding. “Of course, I understand the importance of a ball like that, Mother. Please don’t worry yourself. You raised a man who understands the world.”

Baldwin considered this expression. Just a moment after he said it, Ewan flashed his eyes towards him: an assertion that, of course, Ewan truly couldn’t comprehend the world, at least not at all times. Baldwin gave a light smile. How complicated it was: Ewan’s clear love for him. A love that he could never match.

“But please. Please! Tell me. Marta, you’ve been entirely too quiet throughout this conversation,” Aunt Margaret said. She slurped up the last bit of sausage and padded the napkin across her lips. “You looked so beautiful when you left. I felt sure that if the Duke didn’t fall in love with you immediately, he should be said to be blind.”

“She did,” Baldwin asserted suddenly. “She looked beautiful.”

Marta’s blue eyes found his immediately. Her cheeks flushed pink. Yet again, Baldwin felt that he’d spoken out of turn. Even Aunt Margaret gave him a curious expression. Moments later, he swallowed and turned his eyes towards his uneaten plate.

“Good. We have news from a male party, then,” Aunt Margaret said. Her voice was boisterous, as though she truly hadn’t comprehended the weight of what Baldwin had just asserted.

Of course, Tatiana arched her brow at him, seemingly clear on his intentions.

But what on earth were his intentions, exactly? He ached with the knowledge that he knew nothing at all.

“You saw the Duke, then?” Aunt Margaret continued, pushing the conversation forward amid taut silence.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” Marta finally said. She dipped her elbows on the table, then immediately pulled them off, conscious of her rudeness.

“And? Goodness, are you always so tight-lipped, or only when I am so desirous of knowing the information?” Aunt Margaret demanded.

“Such a gossiper, Mother,” Tatiana said.

“The girl has come here for a single reason, Tatiana. To join the season. To take part in our incredible culture. Forgive me that I wish to know how far my talents have taken her,” Aunt Margaret spat.

“We danced!” Marta stated, her voice rising. “Twice.”

This was, in fact, true. And it seemed to be enough, for the moment, to inform Aunt Margaret. She clapped her little palms together and said, “Twice! My goodness. I’m sure he found it difficult to keep himself away from you.”

“That’s very much what it seemed like,” Ewan said.

Again, Baldwin was overwhelmed with the memory of his fist against the Duke's stomach. His own stomach gurgled, seemingly attempting to rearrange itself.

"For goodness sake, Baldwin, won't you eat something? Your hunger has taken on a life of its own," Aunt Margaret asserted. "Marta, tell me. Has he made any statement about seeing you again soon?"

"He has said that he would like to," Marta said. Her words were tentative. "Although I'm not terribly certain when."

"He's a man of his word. I know this," Aunt Margaret stated. "Magnificent. Ewan, Baldwin, I'm grateful that you were both there to ensure that she presented herself well. I don't know what she would do without you. We're all here for you, dear. All that misery in the past? You left it at home in Austria. Nothing like that will happen here. I know it."

Chapter 19

Baldwin ate only a portion of his breakfast, a fact that Aunt Margaret seemed overly willing to point out to the rest of the table not once, but thrice. Immediately afterwards, Aunt Margaret shot up from her chair and made an excuse. “I must write a series of correspondences this morning. I hope it isn’t too rude.”

That moment, there was a wild scream from the back of the estate. All members at the table swung their faces in that direction. After a pause, Tatiana muttered, “It’s just the boys. She really does have a way with them. I could lose them forever to the German language. I don’t know that I’d really care, as long as they remained calm in my presence.”

In the wake of breakfast, Tatiana, Baldwin, Ewan, and Marta entered the parlour. Ewan seemed a bit lost in thought and collected a book from the nearby shelf, before cuddling up with it, his hand curling away at a little lost collection of hairs near his left ear. Tatiana collapsed beside him and placed her head back on the headrest and stared at the ceiling with her hands crossed over her stomach.

It seemed, in this strange moment, that Baldwin and Marta were alone.

As though guided by some unseen force, Baldwin led Marta to a nearby sofa and perched at the edge. She settled in, her eyes large and expectant. He dared himself to say everything, to say it clearly and without pause. But of course, he didn’t wish to frighten her.

But before he could articulate, Marta beat him to it. Long after, he supposed that this was always meant to be the way. She was the braver of the two.

“Thank you again for last night,” she said. Her syllables were soft and beautiful, almost like a song. Neither Tatiana or Ewan lifted their heads.

“It was a pleasure,” Baldwin returned. “I wanted to protect you.”

The tension between them made it difficult for Baldwin to breathe. He swallowed and allowed his eyes to creep back towards the doorway. Yet again, there was a holler from the back of the house. He chuckled softly. “Your poor maid.”

“Laura is far stronger than any creature on this earth,” Marta returned.

Baldwin so yearned to draw the little blonde curl that had escaped her perfect up-do, back to its place behind her ear. Such a motion would have been too close, too sincere. He cleared his throat and said, “I don’t suppose you’d like to take a stroll in the garden with me? It’s such a lovely morning, and I always love a walk after breakfast.”

“And yet, you hardly touched your food,” Marta said.

“Aunt Margaret has already given me enough grief about this. I don’t need it from you, too,” he said playfully.

He was always so grateful to his brain when he could muster some sort of playful response. He wanted to appear clever to her. He wanted to seem like enough.

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When they reached the garden, they fell into another tranquil silence. Marta walked about a half-step ahead of him, which allowed him time and space to gaze at her beautiful back, the way the skin caught the morning sunlight and glowed. Again, his fingers remembered the mesmerising smoothness of that skin.

Admittedly, it was strange at first to be totally alone with Marta. It wasn't necessary that they be chaperoned; after all, Baldwin was a very close family friend, so much so that Aunt Margaret had referred to him as Marta's family while at the breakfast table.

However, his heart told a far different story of their relationship.

How was it possible to ask her about hers?

"You don't wish to see him again, do you?" Baldwin asked. They were deep in the rose garden, and the smells were dream-like, thick, vibrant.

Marta didn't bother to turn. She studied a little yellow rose, one that hadn't yet erupted into its full form. "I hope I never have to again. Although it's been clear to me in the past months that what I want

doesn't necessarily come into fruition."

Baldwin stabbed his hands into his pockets. "I suppose I understand what you mean. I've been a bit lacklustre about the state of my life since my father's illness. I feel as though I'm on a sort of path that's been prepared for me. I suppose that's why Ewan can say such things about my personality. I've become a grisly old man."

At this, Marta turned fully to face him. She chuckled and clucked her tongue. "Only the privileged and beautiful can joke about time in such a manner. You're a handsome man with a worthwhile life. Ewan is, assuredly, just jealous. Or perhaps something else."

Was it possible that Marta already sensed the feeling Ewan had for Baldwin? She was undoubtedly perceptive, a woman who didn't dally to form her own opinion. Still, it felt as though they trod dangerous ground.

"Regardless. Around you, it seems, everyone brings up Austria. Terrible things happened to you while you lived there. Things that forced you all the way here."

"And now, I'm faced with Lewis Remington," Marta said. She flashed an ironic smile. "What on earth did I do to deserve such an honour?"

Baldwin wasn't sure how to respond. He laughed and eased alongside her as they entered the next garden, then walked toward the greater grounds, with a hilltop view of the nearby forest. Baldwin marvelled at all the years he'd spent on those grounds without her. With her beside him, he felt he saw them with a fresh perspective.

Of course, this wasn't the sort of thing he would verbalise. He couldn't be forward. Not like Lewis, and not like many other men. He'd often wondered if this sort of view of the world, this sort of inaction, disallowed him happiness of any kind.

Chapter 20

What was it about this man? She found herself a mere foot from him, looking out over the yonder forest as the air shifted through the limbs and made bright green leaves shimmer. She explained to him that in Austria when leaves flipped over to reveal their underbellies, it often meant that rain was imminent. He chuckled at that and said, “In nearly every case, you can reason that rain is about to begin in England.”

He was entirely easy to talk to, the sort of man she could have walked alongside, in both silence and not, for ages. Although she understood why many men and women in England might have perceived Baldwin to be quite simple and boring, she felt his humour simmered beneath everything—it was just something one had to catch on to. She was grateful that she was patient enough to manage it.

“It was dreadful at breakfast today,” Marta said. She collected a few curls behind her ear. “All that pestering about the Duke. I can’t imagine what will happen should she find out what truly happened. But I hope only that the Duke is far too proud to announce what you did.”

Baldwin laughed good-naturedly, although his eyes seemed heavy with pain. “That’s what Ewan said, as well.”

“But Aunt Margaret won’t stop before she pairs me with someone … either the Duke or someone like him,” Marta continued. She stuttered a bit, wondering at the weight of what she said. Every inch of her seemed to scream out for Baldwin to do something. There they stood, without a view of anyone else on the planet, and he kept his hands in

his pockets.

This was no Austrian man. If he'd been Austrian, she would have been pressed up against a tree already, kissed with reckless abandon.

Still, she felt honoured by his conscientious approach. He was far more upright than Lewis Remington, surely, and—surprising to no one more than herself—captured her interest far more than any other man she'd recently fancied.

That said, she knew that if she wanted anything to happen between them, she would have to be the one to make a move. She swallowed and held her breath for a few moments, trying to drum up the energy and bravery. When she'd been a girl, her father had told her relentlessly that she was the bravest girl he'd ever met. Always, she'd shot up to the top of the mountain before him or climbed the tallest tree or outraced the boys, provided her mother wasn't looking. Now, she had to channel that energy for the betterment of her love life.

She'd always known that when it was worthwhile, she would make whatever leap required of her.

Marta guided Baldwin back towards the furthest garden from the house. She felt his footsteps shift beneath him and wondered if he fully perceived her control. He again stabbed his hands into his pockets and cleared his throat. But their conversation had to come to a close, now. There were other topics. Other things to be done.

They swept towards the edge of the garden wall. Once there, they were covered on most sides by thick ivy and shadow. Even the sun lurked just beyond the garden wall, as though it had tucked its head to the side for the purpose of their romance. Marta's bright eyes found

his. Again, she felt stabbed with the realisation that this gaze was one she wanted to maintain for many more years of her life.

“Tell me, Baldwin,” she said. Her voice was low, flirtatious. Sensual, even.

She’d always known how to turn that side of herself on.

“Tell you what?” Baldwin asked.

“Tell me if you’re ever going to kiss me,” Marta murmured.

Baldwin looked surprised. His lips parted, and his eyes reflected confusion. It seemed clear to Marta that no woman, certainly no English woman, had ever demanded something like this from him. She hadn’t a clue what his reaction would be. Her heart thumped about for a moment, proof that she wasn’t as brave as she would have liked.

Chapter 21

The words continued to echo in Baldwin's head. "Tell me if you're ever going to kiss me." It had been no more than a few seconds since their utterance, yet Baldwin currently felt he'd been dropped into a strange, dark, and deep well of feeling and emotion. He no longer felt pinned to the ground by gravity. He knew he had to act swiftly to prove himself; knew that Marta Schnitzler wasn't the sort of woman who would wait around for very long.

When his hands found her torso, he pulled her into him. He did it with much more force than he'd initially planned. The story that played out across her face was one of unique pleasure and excitement. He'd never been the sort of man to excite or surprise anyone.

She thrilled him. She made him reconsider what sort of man he wanted to be. He yearned to explain this to her but knew that at this moment, words would never be enough.

Her breasts pressed hard against his chest, and her thin arms skated across his broad shoulders as he leaned forward, tugged her against him, and kissed her soft, pillow-like lips. A moan escaped her lips and swept through his, a sign of how much she felt for him—proof that their desires were fiery and united in a single mission.

Suddenly, she broke the kiss with a gasp. Her fingers fluttered across her wet lips as she blinked enormous orb-like eyes up at him. He felt her confusion. It seemed clear: the man he was at this moment, this private arena near the back of the garden wall, was not the man she'd suspected him to be constantly. His member bulged hard against his pant leg, and his heart bumped against his ribcage. Her hands

stretched across his chest, and she pressed herself against him again and lifted her chin.

"You are nothing like what I expected you to be," were the words she chose. They simmered with excitement, with adrenaline. And then again, her lips pressed hard against his then opened to allow her perfect tongue to skate across his. Her fingers pinched his skin and then skated down to his flat belly and tucked beneath his pants.

He'd never felt such electricity simmer through his body before. He felt overcome with it. He grabbed the top of the fabric of her gown as he continued to kiss her, gruffer now, more animalistic in nature, and he tugged at the fabric until her beautiful porcelain breasts spilled into his large hands. She broke the kiss and blinked down at them, seemingly surprised yet pleased. His fingers formed over the brown nipples and squeezed, and she moaned again. Her eyes closed, and the lashes fluttered over her cheeks. He moved her against the brick wall, where she placed her head back and tilted her chin towards the sky.

They lost time after that. Marta's hand closed over his hard member; he felt it grow even more solid and rock-hard with her touch. He kissed her ear, her cheek, her throat, and then burrowed his head against her breasts and traced circles around her nipples. Her fingers scattered across his hair and tugged at it lovingly, with endless want. Finally, he found a path beneath her skirt and drew a line across the juncture between her perfect thighs, overwhelmed with wanting to know the secret that lurked there. He wanted to tear the dress from her waist and cast it to the ground and burrow his face between those thighs. Every single moan and cry from her throat, he wanted to feel echoed through the rest of her frame as he thrust his member into her and took her. These were the mad cravings of a man in love.

But all too soon, they heard their names echoed out through the garden.

“Baldwin? Marta?” The voice came from Ewan.

Hurriedly, they both righted their clothes. Marta grabbed a handkerchief and tapped away at her mouth and eyes, attempting to cleanse herself of signs of romance and fix her make-up. Baldwin shuffled his fingers through his hair and whispered, “Do I look all right?”

Marta gave him hazy, lovely eyes. “You really want to hunt for more compliments? At this stage?”

Baldwin laughed, surprised that she’d gone with such sarcasm in the wake of what they’d just done. “Is it really so difficult to pull some sort of ladylike quality out of you?”

“I should hope so,” Marta returned. She arched her brow and returned her hand to his chest, right over his madly beating heart. She again seemed overwhelmed with want.

“Please. I must close up shop for the day,” Baldwin said, his smile stretching wider.

Again, Ewan’s voice hollered out across the garden wall. Marta smacked Baldwin’s chest with the flat of her hand and said, “You’re far too rude for a lady such as myself.”

“You’re a walking contradiction,” Baldwin returned.

“And you’re far different than you initially seem,” Marta said. It was a loaded statement, heavy with promise. “I hope soon I can continue to study you.”

Suddenly, the boys raced out from the other side of the garden wall, chasing after a ball. Laura’s cries joined theirs as she tore across the grass and grabbed the ball, the champion. She smashed the ball against the ground and beat her chest. Her blonde hair had fully escaped its up-do.

“She’s completely lost her mind,” Marta said with a laugh. She whisked away from Baldwin, abandoning him only seconds before Laura noticed her. Ewan, then, appeared as well, his hands on hips as he watched Marta unite with the boys and her dear maid. Marta gripped Laura’s hands. They spun in a wild circle together, becoming a swirl of blonde hair and blue eyes and thin frames and laughter, so much of it. The boys joined in, grabbing one another’s hands and spinning until they fell to the ground.

Throughout this strange pomp and circumstance, Ewan’s eyes turned towards Baldwin’s. For whatever reason, Baldwin suspected that Ewan knew what he and Marta had been up to. Although he didn’t wish to hide this from Ewan, not in the least, he did comprehend a small slice of the pain it had caused him. Still, Ewan nodded to him, a formal greeting, and Baldwin nodded back.

“Children’s games,” Ewan said, nodding towards the girls and the little boys.

“How dreadful that we’re the only adults,” Baldwin said with a laugh. All too recently, he’d come into the idea that formality and rules no longer served him as they once had.

“Indeed. Well, I suppose I’ll have a lunch-time drink. Would you like to join me?” Ewan asked.

This was a lifeline back to normality. Baldwin nodded and smiled. “Of course. How could I refuse something like that?”

“You don’t have to run off? Perform some sort of adult duty for your father’s business?” Ewan asked. “It’s been your constant refrain for some years.”

Baldwin’s eyes turned back towards Marta, who had collected Malcolm in her arms to dot his forehead with kisses. Malcolm shrieked in response, attempting to shove her away playfully. Baldwin felt another smile creep across his cheeks. That moment, Marta lifted her head to peer across the field at him. With this last look of longing, Baldwin understood: what had just occurred was the first of many. There was no way he would allow that to be the final word.

Chapter 22

Throughout lunch, Marta's heart fluttered in her throat. It seemed that Baldwin created little, unique opportunities to very-nearly touch her hand, to guide her eyes back towards his. He told funny little stories, tales that Ewan and Aunt Margaret both agreed they'd never heard before. Everyone doubled over in tears.

"Baldwin! I've never seen you so joyful," Aunt Margaret said, patting the sides of her eyes. "Tell your father that you must quit the business and become our permanent jester."

Marta only picked at her plate, something that was entirely unlike her. Throughout her life, she'd always had a stellar appetite. Laura arched her brow and turned her eyes towards her plate and back up again. In German, Marta muttered, "I'll explain later." It was clear that she couldn't escape the watchful eyes of Laura.

Back upstairs, Marta paced next to her bed while Laura perched atop of it, with her long legs stretched out in front of her. Lazily, in anticipation of what Marta was prepared to say, Laura strung a brush through her long, blonde locks and gazed out the window. "Yet again, storm clouds," Laura said. "It seems that's an ever-present English situation."

"Yes. Dreadful, isn't it? The sun always manages to escape," Marta muttered. She clenched her fists behind her back and gaped at the ground. How could she find her way back to any sort of clarity?

“It’s Baldwin, isn’t it?” Laura finally asked. It seemed she’d grown fatigued of this rather lacklustre game of waiting.

“Of course,” Marta said. Her lips pressed hard upon one another as she drummed up the appropriate words to say next. “I think I’ve fallen for him.”

Laura arched her brow. “You’ve had so many loves already this year. Add him to the long list and proceed! Perhaps you can catch the lust of all the men in England.”

Marta collapsed on the bed beside her once-maid, now-friend. She shook her head, delicately. “I think it’s a bit different this time. I’ve hardly known him but a few weeks, and already, I picture my life with him. I detested England weeks ago, and now, I envision myself in a cathedral, pledging myself to him for the rest of my life.”

Laura shrugged. “Then why not go through with it?”

“It’s my Aunt Margaret, of course,” Marta continued. “She’s set her sights on the Duke and surely already written my mother about the match. Somehow, I must convince Aunt Margaret that Baldwin is an appropriate match for mewhile further ensuring that she thinks the entire thing is her idea. This sort of matchmaking is her lifeblood. Her raison d’etre. And beyond that, we’re still so early in the season itself.”

“You’re a prisoner to fine parties and beautiful gowns,” Laura responded, her voice simmering with sarcasm.

Marta rolled her eyes. “I know it must sound quite foolish.”

“It does. But it all does from here.” Laura reached up and collected several blonde curls behind Marta’s ear. The act was sisterly, affectionate. “Perhaps you could write to your mother about your intentions. Perhaps she’ll see what you want.”

“My mother doesn’t trust my instincts,” Marta continued. “It’s part of the reason I’m here.”

“To be frank with you, darling Marta, I don’t think I trust your instincts, either,” Laura said, giggling playfully. “But we’re still just barely women. How can we ever know precisely what we want?”

Marta considered this. She knew that Laura spoke the truth. As she prepared what to say next, Laura squeezed her shoulders and recited in improper English, “I have to be telling you something.”

Marta drew her chin up, grateful to consider something else beyond her own anxious thoughts. “What is it?”

Laura shifted. She raised one leg over her other beneath her skirts, then blurted, “I’ve met a man in the village.”

“What! You can’t be serious.” What Marta truthfully wanted to say was: how was it possible to fall in love without knowing the language?

But of course, Laura was consistently full of surprises. She beamed throughout the telling: she’d met the man on a little trip into the village with Tatiana’s boys. “All too frequently, Tatiana passes them

off to me," Laura said. "But I must say, they're the reason I met this man. He owns his own little fruit and vegetable stand… Just a chipper and handsome English gentleman. He would never have noticed me if it weren't for the boys."

"What happened?" Marta asked.

"The boys raced through the stalls and stands and then tumbled directly into his!" Laura said. She smacked both palms across her cheeks in mock-amazement. "All these fruits and vegetables went flying in a million different directions. I shrieked and started to yell at the boys—first in broken English and then in German, which, as I've come to discover, sounds much harsher and therefore is far more effective when it comes to frightening the boys."

Marta cackled. This was something she'd discovered as a younger girl. When German fled her mouth, people in England scrunched their faces up in shock. What was this wretched language? Why did this young and pretty blonde girl sound so menacing?

"The boys have really come into the German language," Laura continued. "They spoke to me in German immediately after to say that they were sorry. Then, they turned to look at Matthew…"

"Matthew. His name is Matthew!" Marta cried.

"Yes. They turned to look at him and said, in perfect English, how sorry they were to have spilled his stand. Matthew was so confused by the situation that he burst into laughter. He has the most wonderful laugh, Marta! He looked at me as though I was this curiosity he could never have fathomed."

“I’m sure he’d never heard of Austria before,” Marta said.

“He hadn’t. The boys described to him what it was like in English. At least, I’m fairly certain that’s what they said.” Laura contemplated this for a moment. “He asked a few questions. I think he wanted to know more about the mountains, which I had described to the boys in earnest. I couldn’t imagine a childhood without them. Could you?”

Marta shook her head. Pangs of sadness shot through her. She ached for the mountains.

“Regardless, we helped him with the vegetables and fruits after that,” Laura continued. “And I said a few lacklustre words in English to him. He seemed genuinely thrilled at my attempt, although I’m sure it was pathetic.”

“You’ve got much better,” Marta affirmed.

“Yes, well. I met him ten days ago, and since then, I’ve lent fresh effort towards the English language. I’ve journeyed to the market three times since then, and each time, I bring Matthew another word or phrase. He rewards me with fresh tomatoes and fresh cucumbers and fresh herbs, which I usually just pass along to the kitchen staff. He’s genuine and kind, Marta. The boys have plotted and schemed to go back with me again, perhaps tomorrow, to help translate.”

Marta could hardly believe what Laura said. Her eyes filled with tears. How was it possible that already, Laura charged towards a far different reality than the ones they’d arrived in England with? Perhaps soon, Marta would have to say goodbye.

Marta translated how thrilled she was to Laura once more. Laura squeezed her hand and said, “But perhaps soon, all will work out between yourself and Baldwin.”

“Perhaps. But I imagine it won’t be as simple as picking up a few squashed vegetables,” Marta said, her voice heavy.

“Whatever happens, Baldwin loves you far more than either of us can fully imagine,” Laura said. “You can see it in everything he does. He even acts out more, tells more stories. He’s become something else to please you. Perhaps this lurked within him all the time.”

Chapter 23

The next season party arrived several days later. Marta mocked herself inwardly: it was true what Laura said. “How wretched that I have to wear such marvellous gowns and dance to such beautiful music and flirt and play such a silly game. How frivolous and wonderful that I’m allowed such an easy life.”

Since Laura’s admission of her new love, Marta had more-or-less allowed her off the hook with regards to her duties. She laughed to herself, remembering what her mother had said when Marta had stated she wanted Laura to come along to England with her. “Won’t you want to pick someone a bit older? Someone a bit more responsible? I can’t imagine that Laura will remain happy in England for long.”

Now, it seemed, Laura had set herself up for eternal happiness in England, sans the position of lady-in-waiting.

Still, during the final hours before this next party, Laura popped by Marta’s quarters to finalise her curls and make-up and fluff up her gown. Laura’s skin glowed as she chatted amicably about her most recent trek to the village to meet Matthew. “Malcolm has started to call him Uncle! Can you believe it?”

Marta laughed. “The relationship you have with Malcolm and Walter is far more powerful than the one they seem to have with their own mother…”

“Tatiana didn’t take to motherhood well, it seems,” Laura said thoughtfully, as she curled up the final blonde strands around Marta’s cheeks. “Every time she spots me, she hugs me and mutters how grateful she is that she’s allowed time to herself. I cannot be certain, but I think she’s having something of an affair of her own.”

Marta’s ears perked up. “You must be joking.”

“I’m not!” Laura returned. “Her husband is continually away on business, and she uses my services all the time. I imagine she must be up to something, in that big house all alone.”

Marta made a mental note to investigate what Laura suggested. When they finalised her look for the night, Laura dismissed herself and said she wanted to study English in her bedroom. Marta wished her well and then joined Ewan in the foyer downstairs. He looked a bit reluctant, almost fatigued, with his cheeks hollowed out. Since Marta and Baldwin had kissed one another against the garden wall, Ewan had kept his distance from Marta—as though he suspected and needed to take his time to contemplate his feelings. Marta had much empathy for his situation.

That was, of course, if what she suspected regarding his feelings for Baldwin was truthful.

Stranger things in the world had happened. She knew this to be true.

Ewan forced a smile and bowed in a mocking, playful way. “You look stunning as ever, my beautiful cousin. What on earth will I do with you? The moment we enter any ballroom across the county, all eyes are drawn to you, rather than myself. I dare say I’ll exit the season without so much as a bite.”

On the carriage ride, both seemed to fall into conversation topics that had nothing to do with Baldwin. Marta still recalled what Ewan had said about him: that he tried his best to avoid any events such as these. Still, she had more than an ounce of hope that he would make an appearance.

When they reached the estate, Ewan assisted her from the carriage. Around them were a hum of onlookers and party-goers, women in fine gowns, their glossy curls shining, and the men beside them formidable and tall and broad of shoulder and surly in gaze. Marta knew that she was a topic of much gossip, especially in the wake of what had occurred with the Duke. Still, she kept her eyes upright and connected with nearly each of the onlookers.

“Good evening,” she said to Penelope, the red-head who’d once courted Baldwin. “How good to see you once more.”

Penelope’s eyes skated back into the belly of the carriage just before Ewan closed the door. “I see that Baldwin hasn’t arrived with you,” she said.

Was it possible that this girl still held her own private hope that she and Baldwin could rekindle their previous quasi-romance? Marta prepared some sort of romance—something about Baldwin’s distaste for such affairs. But before she could spit out the syllables, she heard the great boom of his voice through the crowd. She turned swiftly to find him: deliriously handsome, powerful, several inches taller than the nearest man, with a swagger that nearly made her swoon.

“Good evening,” Baldwin said to the three of them. His eyes didn’t leave Marta’s for a moment. “I trust your journey went well.”

“I was just asking them whether you would make an appearance tonight,” Penelope chirped.

Still, Baldwin hardly gave her a moment’s notice. Ewan chuckled and said, “Two parties in a week! Baldwin, what will become of you? You’re devolving before our eyes. Soon, you’ll be twenty, then fifteen, then a mere toddler. Laura will have to look after you, the way she’s looked after the boys.”

Penelope blinked confusedly. Baldwin shrugged.

“I felt it would be a pity to miss out on more of the fun,” he said. “Besides. You know how much I love the music.”

Marta scolded herself inwardly and forced her eyes away from his. Their attraction was palpable. With so many onlookers, she felt ridiculous and fraudulent. An affair with Baldwin? It went outside the bounds of what her Aunt Margaret had set about for her. In fact, last night, Aunt Margaret had sat with her once more and forced her to recount as many things as she could about the Duke’s pompous words and previous conversation.

“We must study him. Know his mind,” Aunt Margaret had said, her eyes beady. “I don’t want to miss anything.”

Marta had played along, of course; it was her duty. Still, in the back of her mind, she tried to drum up some sort of possible way out.

When they entered the ballroom, Marta was shocked to peer directly into the eyes of the Duke, Lewis Remington, almost immediately. He seemed hunter-like, as though he'd perched directly there, towards the drink table, with his eyes on the grand doorway for a full sight of her. She forced a smile across her lips and felt Baldwin's eyes scan her cheeks. A soft sound escaped his lips. Was it hesitation? Jealousy?

Still, Marta's stomach lurched at the idea of dancing with the Duke. She turned swiftly towards Baldwin. His dark eyes connected with hers. "Would you like to have my first dance?" she asked.

"Nothing would make me happier," Baldwin affirmed.

The moment the strings sprung to life and cast the couple onto the dance floor, Marta was conscious of the Duke's glowering expression. He seemed filled with rage. Her feet kept up their rapid turning beneath her, matching Baldwin step for step.

"He looks murderous," Marta murmured under her breath.

"Don't pay any attention to him. I'm sure he's just sick to his stomach. He knows what he's on the verge of losing," Baldwin said.

Marta's eyes cut back towards him. She swallowed, genuinely shocked that he'd been so forward. Her heart jumped into her throat. "We really shouldn't be dancing like this. Not first."

"We're allowed a dance or two. Don't you think?" Baldwin asked. "It seems unfair that the rest of the world can have their minutes with

you, their hands on your back, and their lips so close to yours. Why not me, also?"

Marta blushed. "You speak so frankly."

"I assumed you Austrian girls liked that sort of thing."

"I think we need to be careful," Marta whispered.

"But what if I don't wish to be?" he returned.

A smile snuck its way across Marta's lips. She rolled her eyes back again and muttered, "I don't know why it is I always get myself caught in such ridiculously difficult situations."

"Perhaps you're just ridiculously difficult yourself," Baldwin said.

"You sound like my mother," Marta said.

The song ended far too swiftly. When they parted, Marta muttered an awkward, "Thank you for the dance, before turning back and heading towards Ewan, who, again, had found himself in conversation with a beautiful brunette. It seemed that pretty girls flocked towards him. Marta prayed that he would find pleasure in at least one of them, at some point in his life. Truly, she wanted endless happiness for him if he could find it within himself to allow it.

As she walked back towards her cousin, she spotted Tatiana in the corner, speaking in what seemed like hushed tones to another man with rich chestnut hair and a furrowed brow. Marta's heart lifted. Was it possible that Laura had been correct about Tatiana's affair? The moment the thought struck her, Tatiana swung around and caught sight of her. She forced a smile and fled from her chestnut-haired stranger. When she reached Marta, she lifted her hands to Marta's shoulders and said, "Darling girl! I'm so glad to see you again."

"I didn't imagine you'd be here," Marta said.

"Yes. My husband is again away on business, and it seems I find it harder and harder to remain alone in that big house. I had another maid watch over the children. It seems yours was occupied this evening." Tatiana grinned secretively. "The boys have informed me that she has a bit of a secret of her own in the village. I think it's splendid that they've become her translation. Certainly not the sort of world experience I envisioned for them at this age."

"They've really taken to German, haven't they? It makes me terribly nostalgic for the old days in Austria," Marta said. She cleared her throat and added, "Who was that gentleman you were talking to?"

"Oh! That's only Peter, a friend of my husband's," Tatiana said. Her cheeks seemed to burn red. "He's a dear friend, a frequent figure at our estate. He had a few questions about my husband's recent business propositions, is all. Of course, I told him that I knew very little about any of this. I'm nothing but a silly, empty-headed wife."

"I suppose silly and empty-headed are descriptions I've never heard applied to you," Marta returned.

“Ah. My husband knows me the best,” Tatiana said. She tucked a strand of hair absently behind her ear. “Peter did inform me of something a bit strange, however. It seems that the Duke is enraged that you danced with dear Baldwin.”

“Is the Duke friendly with your Peter?”

“He isn’t *my* Peter,” Tatiana insisted.

“I didn’t mean it this way. I meant only…” Marta stuttered for a moment. She peered out across the crowd and caught sight once more of the Duke. He muttered conspiratorially with another of his friends, a man she recognised from other parties.

“I would be careful, darling,” Tatiana said. “The Duke is quite jealous. He seems to think that he had some sort of promise with my mother. A promise to have you. According to Peter, the Duke feels that his goodwill has been slighted.”

“I suppose in his world, goodwill extends to the darkest corners of the Regent’s ball,” Marta said, jaw clenched.

Tatana gave a light shrug. “I am sure he would be difficult to be married to. But so is anyone, darling. You must marry for the good of the family.”

Tatiana excused herself after that. Marta blinked after her, genuinely aghast. She yearned to blare just how little regard it seemed Tatiana had for her own marriage, her own children. What were they all

chasing after? What was any of this for? And what was the point of marrying for a title when it seemed that title alone covered very little of humanity's happiness?

Marta attempted to verbalise these complaints to Ewan minutes later. Ewan chuckled and said, "I have suspected Tatiana has been having an affair for several years, although, as her younger brother, I've never been in any position to point it out to her. Still, what you say is correct, regarding title and happiness. I suppose it's another of your super powers. You're an outsider, and thus, you can see us all so clearly."

"Yes, but you're nothing like this, Ewan," Marta returned.

"Ah, but I am. And I don't mind it," Ewan said. "I will uphold my mother's hopes and dreams eventually. I just only hope to have a bit more fun before that."

"How much fun can one man have?" Marta asked, her grin widening.

"I hope to push every limit," Ewan said.

Suddenly, Penelope appeared before them once more. She crossed her slender arms over her chest and looked positively void of joy. "The entire party is up in arms about Baldwin."

Marta arched her brow, conscious that Penelope's eyes scanned her face, her neck, the top of her bosom. She'd never felt under such a disdainful gaze.

“Whatever do you mean?” Ewan asked. He seemed to put on a stupid, almost arrogant air, the tone suited to annoy her.

“I mean that Baldwin is in attendance. Some people assume that he might take part in many more events throughout the season. And it seems that most of them comprehend precisely why,” Penelope said. Her eyes shot daggers towards Marta.

“Is it because of the free wine? We all know that Baldwin wants to become a lust, but has never had the confidence to go for it,” Ewan said.

Penelope’s cheeks reddened. “I’ve never appreciated your humour, Ewan.”

“And I’ve never appreciated your cheekbones, although I feel incredibly sure that they could murder me with their point,” Ewan returned.

Suddenly, Lord Remington appeared behind Penelope. His eyes were formidable, dominant. Penelope whipped back and glared at him. “I suppose you’re here to speak with Marta, like everyone else.”

Ewan let out a wry laugh. Lord Remington didn’t give any indication that he’d heard what she’d said. Rather, he stepped forward and gave a slight bow. “I hope you’ll do me the honour of dancing with me just once, Fraulein.”

Marta knew she had to agree if only to ensure that no added gossip would swirl around them. Besides, she knew that her aunt would wish to learn still more about her “budding” affair with him. She needed to have fresh information to proceed with breakfast the following day.

Penelope stalked off as Marta stepped up and joined herself with the Duke. With every motion she made, she felt regretful. She detested his smell, a musk that seemed wood-like and simmering with sweat. She supposed nobody ever mentioned his stench, due to his incredible power. She prayed that one day she would find the chance.

“You look beautiful, Marta. As usual,” the Duke began.

Their feet tapped about beneath them. Marta felt as though her feet betrayed her. Why couldn’t she fumble about, fall to the side? Why did her body play along?

“Thank you. Your handsomeness rivals the greatest men at this very party,” Marta said sarcastically.

The Duke laughed grotesquely. Marta wondered if he’d chosen to believe her clearly-mocking remark.

“I love your pep. Your personality. It is far more than I bargained for, upon my first conversation with your aunt,” the Duke said.

“My Aunt Margaret seems to have a very clear idea of where my life should go,” Marta returned. “I dare say she should be a fiction writer.”

“You believe her thoughts to lack truth?” he asked.

“I cannot speak ill of my aunt with a near-stranger,” Marta said.

“And yet, I don’t perceive myself to be any stranger in your life,” the Duke countered. His eyes grew shadowed with anger. “In fact, I believe what you say to be something of a criticism. I may need to take a good, hard look at the way I’ve interacted with you. In my mind, we’re far more than strangers.”

“Perhaps you had better take a good, hard look,” Marta said.

“You’re remarkably clever, Marta. Any man should fancy you. But I know you to be better suited to me than to any other man in the county,” the Duke continued.

“You seem rather clear about your opinion. I suppose that’s a good thing. A man should always know what he wants, regardless of whether he receives it. It shows good intention,” Marta said.

“Tell me. What can I do, Marta? What can I do to bring you to never speak with Baldwin Terrence again?”

Marta let out a fluttery laugh. “I’ve told you countless times, now, My Lord. Baldwin is like family.”

“And I know if I’m not careful, he’ll become far more than that,” the

Duke returned.

The song finished. Marta gave him an eager smile and said, “I wish you all the luck in the world,” before turning back. Almost immediately, her eyes found Baldwin’s. Her heart lurched. She lent him a secret smile, then pressed her finger to her lips and gave him a slight shake of the head. The scene at the dance felt far too volatile for continued conversation. She would explain it to him the following day, in secret. She would tell him that all she yearned for was to be latched in his arms, to gaze into his eyes, to feel his lips upon hers.

Yes. That was to be the final time she had any correspondence with the Duke. Many years from then, she would perhaps see him on the road and gaze at him as though he were but a stranger. One moment, she would see him, and the next, she would blink away. Perhaps she wouldn’t even notice. Perhaps it would mean nothing at all.

Chapter 24

The following morning at breakfast, Aunt Margaret seemed overwhelmed with emotion. She lifted her fork and knife on either side of her broad chest and bellowed, “I’ve incredible news for our household.”

Marta, Baldwin, Ewan, Tatiana, the two boys, Uncle Everett, and Laura blinked up from their sausages, mesmerised. The table seemed to shake with her excitement. Later, Laura would remark that she’d never seen an English person so passionate. To this, Marta would laugh sadly and say, “Yes. Unfortunately, it seems, passion isn’t one of their strong suits.”

“What is it, Mother?” Ewan finally asked. He lifted a sausage towards his mouth and chomped at the edge. His eyes seemed dull, bored—as though he wished the drama with Marta, Baldwin, and the Duke would finalise itself immediately.

“The Duke sent correspondence this morning. It seems he’d like to come to the Thompson Estate for lunch. Today.” Aunt Margaret’s grin widened. “This means only one thing, my darling girl. Marta. You must have really put on a show last night. He wouldn’t come all this way for the likes of me, that’s for certain.”

“What about Tatiana?” Ewan returned. His smile was playful, knowing.

“Whatever do you mean? Your sister is happily married,” Aunt

Margaret spat.

“Of course. I know that,” Ewan said.

Tatiana furrowed her brow and turned her eyes towards her plate. Malcolm and Walter shot up from their chairs, grabbed two biscuits each, and scampered out into the hallway. Laura grabbed her own biscuit and raced after them, calling out in German, “I can hardly keep up with them! These children have no chance of normality.”

Tatiana seemed not to notice the hubbub. Marta realised that Aunt Margaret’s eyes had turned back to her, seemingly requesting some response. After all, all of this had to do with her future. Wasn’t she meant to be pleased?

“That’s interesting,” Marta said. She rolled her sausage about on her plate and blinked several times. Her tongue found no creativity.

“Interesting? I suppose that’s a word for it,” Aunt Margaret returned. “Perhaps you’d better change before lunch. I wouldn’t want you in such a drab day dress. Marta, you do understand that everything you do throughout this time could make or break the Duke’s affinity for you.”

Marta’s eyes turned towards Baldwin. He blinked down at his plate, seemingly uninterested. Marta knew that this was a front. How she wished for him to stand now, to blare that the Duke wasn’t welcome there—that he and Marta would be together for good.

“It’s quite exciting, isn’t it?” Marta said. Her words were regretful,

staggered.

Still, her aunt seemed not to notice. “I dare say we can begin to consider engagement parties,” she said. “When the Duke knows what he wants, he gets it. He hasn’t made many house calls like this, not in the previous few years. Oh, goodness. We must have something special for lunch. What do you suppose?” Her eyes searched the table, looking like mighty lighthouse lights cast out across the ocean. She seemed to find nothing that satisfied her in the empty faces she found.

“I will discuss this with the cook immediately,” she said.

“Darling, you really should eat something,” Uncle Everett said. The words were lacklustre, an obvious front. It was clear that he had to “put on” this sort of show, although he seemed not to care.

“You know that I cannot eat when I’m so excited,” Aunt Margaret called back. Already, she disappeared down the hallway, leaving the rest of the breakfast table in silence.

Uncle Everett clucked his tongue. Ewan heaved a sigh. Marta felt unsure if she could live through the remainder of the day, given her immense hatred for the Duke. “You must be kidding me,” she muttered.

“You should be thankful for it,” Tatiana said suddenly. Her eyes were like daggers. “My mother has gone out of her way for you. She cares for your eternal happiness.”

“To be frank, Sister, I don’t think Mother’s actionable response to Lord

Remington has anything to do with Marta's happiness, and everything to do with what her friends will say when they learn of the match," Ewan recited.

Tatiana grumbled to herself. Marta mouthed, "Thank you," to Ewan, who simply shrugged and said, "It's true. Nobody else in this family seems willing or able to speak the truth. I'm tired of it."

**

Marta was convinced that Baldwin would take his leave after breakfast. After all, it seemed that he'd neglected many of his business duties to spend more time with her, to attend parties, to laugh and banter in the gardens. However, after the plates were cleared, Baldwin announced to Ewan that he would remain at the Thompson Estate throughout the early afternoon, if that at all suited Ewan. Ewan gave a lacklustre shrug, as though he'd already suspected this might occur.

"Do as you wish, Baldwin. It's not as though I can control any of this."

Tensions seemed high. Everyone seemed caught up in their own simmering passions. Laura, for one, seemed wild with apprehension about her brewing love for Matthew, the vegetable stand man. To get out this adrenaline, she chased the boys around the back garden and grounds with far more abandon than usual. Marta watched from the side, seated in the sun alongside Tatiana, Ewan, and Baldwin.

Ewan, then, seemed annoyed about his own lust—or perhaps love—for Baldwin, something Marta knew he could never pursue or even formulate with words. This left him sarcastic and irritable, apt to point fingers at anyone else and blame them for their own unhappiness.

Tatiana, then, seemed filled with unrest due to her potential affair.

This left Baldwin and Marta, both of whom found themselves falling in love and unable to tug themselves from the constraints Aunt Margaret had put upon them.

Still, Marta wondered what might happen next.

Was Baldwin remaining at the Thompson Estate to make some sort of stand to the Duke?

Or would he step aside and allow Lord Remington whatever reign he wanted--including his claim over Marta?

Chapter 25

Baldwin wasn't entirely sure why he remained on at the Thompson Estate. In truth, he simply couldn't imagine abandoning Marta and leaving her to the mercies of Aunt Margaret and the Duke. He stirred with anger, watching as Laura,Malcolm, and Walter stretched their legs across the grounds with manic energy. He wished he could unleash his own madness in this manner. He felt he had to remain upright and stoic and sure, if only to prove to Marta that he could handle this. He could handle her, and he would keep her safe.

He simply didn't know how to manage it.

As they sat at the edge of the garden with the sun beating down upon them, Baldwin was struck once more with Marta's beauty. Her blue eyes looked sombre, sad, as they traced up and down with the children and Laura, following their action. He willed them to look towards him. They didn't.

Perhaps this was proof that he'd already lost.

Moments later, Aunt Margaret appeared behind them. She'd bustled about all morning, frantically attempting to prepare the house for the Duke's arrival. Now, she articulated Baldwin's name and gestured for him to come inside with her. Baldwin was surprised. His first inclination was that perhaps Aunt Margaret wanted him to conduct some sort of operation for him. It wouldn't have been the first time that she'd requested him to carry a bookshelf or rearrange some tables.

However, when they arrived within the shadowed halls of the mansion, Aunt Margaret led them into Uncle Everett's study and latched the door behind them. Uncle Everett was nowhere to be found. Baldwin marvelled that this was perhaps one of the first and only times he and Aunt Margaret had been in such a small space together.

Her eyes told him that this was trouble.

"Baldwin, darling," she began. She drew her thick fingers together contemplatively, then bustled to the other side of the desk, as though the act of sitting in the same place in which her husband conducted business might instill within her more confidence.

Baldwin remained standing until she ordered him to sit. He wasn't the sort of man not to obey a woman in her own house. He placed his hands on his bent knees and waited. The tension in the room mounted.

"Baldwin, it's come to my attention that we may have encountered a sort of problem," Aunt Margaret began.

"I don't understand," Baldwin said. He was well-versed in the act of business speak, able to pretend something was real or unreal until the moment he had to turn himself in. He didn't perceive this to be anything more than proper business etiquette, not honest or dishonest, exactly, but somewhere in between.

"I believe—shall we say—you have something of an affinity for my Austrian niece. Now, before you insist that you don't, hear me out," Aunt Margaret said. She stretched her palms wide and continued.

“Marta is a darling girl. Beautiful, intelligent, worldly. I think it stands to reason that you would find fancy with her. But Baldwin, I think it’s also fair to say that I know you better than you know yourself.”

Baldwin arched his brow. He hadn’t anticipated this level of conversation.

“With that, I mean, you’re a rather serious man. You’re a man of goodwill and business. You don’t ordinarily dally about at such parties and balls. You find them frivolous and wastes of time, and you’d much rather spend your time over your ledger. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Perhaps this had been so in the past. Already, though, Baldwin recognised the darkness that lurked behind her words. It seemed she wanted to ban him back to that life.

“I know that you and my niece are friendly with one another. That pleases me. After all, I’ve loved you as a son for many, many years. You know that,” Aunt Margaret continued.

“And I’ve been grateful to your warmth,” Baldwin returned.

Aunt Margaret gave him a sly smile. “That’s delightful to hear. I suppose you won’t detest me too much to say that… if you get in the way of the budding relationship between my niece and the Duke, I will require you to leave this house. I won’t know when to invite you back.”

Baldwin’s heart thudded. He felt twisted with anger, resentment, and confusion. Still, he knew he had to act this out, press forward,

pretend. He had to say anything he could to ensure that he could remain at the estate, within reach of Marta Schnitzler.

He would not let her go without a fight.

“I have very little interest in your niece beyond friendship,” Baldwin asserted. “Forgive me for saying so. It’s entirely true what you say. We’re quite different from one another. I’m here mostly because my work has hit a stall in these summer months. You know how difficult it is for me to remain at my family estate throughout the day, without anything much to do. It’s lacklustre, and it drains me. Forgive me for being so forward about the current predicament.”

He knew he’d hit precisely where he’d needed to. Aunt Margaret’s face drained of colour. She leaned back in her chair and collected her fat fingers together and breathed a heavy sigh. “Oh, goodness. Baldwin, I’m terribly sorry. I hadn’t a clue. I suppose you must think I’m so selfish for assuming that your intentions were anything but pure.”

“It’s really nothing to worry about. Things are a bit different this year,” Baldwin said, grateful to his mind for brewing up such a lie so swiftly. “But I hope that once autumn begins, we’ll be on a better track.”

“You’re entirely too clever for your own good, Baldwin. I know that you’ll be prosperous once more,” Aunt Margaret said. Still, she seemed strained, aghast at her own staggering rudeness. “Frankly, I cannot believe that I…” She studied the empty desk between them, seemingly unable to muster the strength to go on. “You know that I care for you. You’re on my list next, Baldwin. I will find you a beautiful wife. A woman to bear your sons. Someone who will appreciate your sturdy and stoic nature.”

“Thank you, Aunt Margaret. It’s not necessary,” Baldwin said.

“If I waited for anyone to find me necessary, I would be waiting a long time,” Aunt Margaret returned.

These words rang through Baldwin’s mind as he returned to the garden. He supposed it was quite lonely to be Aunt Margaret. Her heyday had ended years ago; she worked with other people’s borrowed time while her husband ignored her.

At that moment, Baldwin resolved that if he were able to marry Marta —somehow, someway—he would never treat her the way ordinary husbands treated their wives. He would remind her every day of how grateful he was to know her. He would take her to the mountains and whisper her name as they made love and make her tell him the greatest secrets of her mind.

Aunt Margaret did, in fact, love him. Baldwin knew this to be a fact. He simply had to pray and hope that one day, she would regard him as an appropriate match for Marta.

But he wasn’t willing to stoop low, to grovel.

Whatever happened, he would sit through this assuredly horrendous lunch with Lord Remington. He would smile, make jokes, banter, and he would do it all with heavy optimism.

He only wished he could dig into Marta’s brain, perceive her thoughts. Such an outpouring of honour from a Duke, a man of incredible title,

was certainly nothing to ignore. Perhaps this was the sort of thing that would sway Marta's mind.

Chapter 26

When Baldwin arrived back from indoors with Aunt Margaret, Marta peered at him curiously. He flashed a seemingly-confident smile, although his eyes didn't come along with it. She frowned, aching to ask him what Aunt Margaret had wanted him for. Before she could, Ewan blurted, "What was that about?"

Baldwin gave a light shrug. "She needed a bit of help with something."

"She never asks me to help her with the heavy lifting," Ewan said. His lips parted for a late-morning yawn. "I suppose she knows I will never be the brawny son my father yearned for. Now that Tatiana is out of the house, he has no one with his masculine energy…"

"Hey!" Tatiana smacked his upper arm. "That's horrid."

In the field, Laura and the boys stumbled to a halt. Laura fell onto her back and gasped for air. Malcolm collapsed beside her and pressed his head against her stomach. All three looked just as exhausted as Marta felt.

"I suppose what they do is akin to what we do emotionally throughout the season," she said off-handedly to Tatiana.

"I would do anything to trade them," Tatiana said.

When the Duke arrived, Marta's body seemed to clam up. She pressed her lips together in rage, apprehension. She remembered that horrid night at the Regent's, remembered that Baldwin had had to punch him to get him off of her—and yearned to live in a society that allowed for truth and honesty. Unfortunately, she remained an outsider in England, swept up in the ever-changing tide of another world.

They greeted the Duke in the parlour. He looked regal and handsome, just as ever, and he kissed Aunt Margaret's hand before reaching for Marta's. Marta shifted uncomfortably, detesting his lips upon her skin. When he released her, she forced a smile to form.

"Good afternoon, My Lord. Welcome to our home," she said.

"It's marvellous," the Duke returned. His voice was clearly false, a bit higher than normal. He beamed at Aunt Margaret, then at Uncle Everett, both of whom seemed overly willing to swoon. "And it smells magnificent."

"We're having lamb," Aunt Margaret announced. "Recently purchased from a nearby farm."

"I adore lamb," the Duke returned.

Aunt Margaret seemed apt to faint. When the Duke turned to march towards the dining room, Aunt Margaret flashed her face around and made her eyebrows bob up and down. Behind Marta, Ewan grumbled something she couldn't fully hear. It seemed clear they were in for a raucous, hopefully, semi-disastrous affair.

Once inside the dining room, Aunt Margaret hovered in the corner to instruct everyone on seating arrangements. “Duke, I would love to give you the head of the table. And Marta, why don’t you sit next to him? Yes, there by the window. Oh, marvellous.”

Marta walked as a captive on a plank and found herself directly beside the Duke. Her nostrils filled once more with his stench. His eyes scanned across her cheeks, over the bulge of her dress. Aunt Margaret had demanded she change into something that seemed a bit more provocative, a light lavender gown that Marta had previously loved. Now, with this added memory, she felt she might not.

Aunt Margaret seated Baldwin on the other side of the table, near Uncle Everett. Ewan sat beside him, while Aunt Margaret sat across from her, with Tatiana directly beside. The boys and Laura had decided to take their meals in the garden, a fact that overwhelmed Marta with jealousy.

“Tatiana, I don’t believe I’ve seen your boys before,” the Duke said. “They’re quite handsome.”

Tatiana chortled. “Please, don’t tell them that. They know themselves only as wild, racing terrors. If they knew they had any control with their adorable nature, I imagine they might decide to rule the entire continent.”

There was light laughter. Even Marta joined in, although her throat felt frozen. Baldwin seemed unwilling or unable to catch her eye across the table. For whatever reason, she so yearned for just a flicker of recognition. Why had he remained there? Was it out of some sort of morbid curiosity? Did he wish to protect her from the Duke?

Still, it seemed the Duke was overly willing to pretend that Baldwin had never punched him. He hadn't yet addressed him, even as he'd said hello to nearly everyone else in attendance.

"What has your day looked like thus far?" Aunt Margaret asked the Duke. She looked more like a teenager than an older woman as she ate tenderly, seemingly conscious of his gaze.

"It's been rather busy with fruitful meetings throughout the morning," the Duke said. He tapped his lips with his napkin and cast his eyes towards Marta, as though they were both in on some sort of secret.

Marta yearned to assure him that they would never see eye to eye on anything. They would never hold secrets that they would keep from everyone else. Their world would never be the same.

Aunt Margaret glared at Marta, then, as though it was up to her to answer. Marta cast her eyes back and collected her glass to take a small sip of berry wine. Before she could dredge up an answer, Ewan said, "What is it you do throughout these meetings, My Lord?"

The Duke looked grateful that he'd asked. The words had been almost flirtatious, although only Marta and, perhaps, Baldwin might have noticed.

"As you know, I've grown quite close with the Regent in recent months," the Duke said. "We speak atlength about the betterment of the county and its residents."

“I see,” Ewan said. “Isn’t that a great deal of pressure on your shoulders?”

Again, only Marta and Baldwin may have perceived the subtle sarcasm beneath his words. Ewan’s smile remained stellar.

“It’s funny you say that, Ewan, because I really don’t think about it until someone like yourself brings it up,” the Duke returned, seemingly genuinely pleased to be able to dip into his incredible power over society. “Marta, I suppose much of this is beyond your comprehension. Things are quite different in Austria.”

“Not exactly,” Marta returned. “We also have men of incredible power. They just speak a different language.”

Her eyes connected with Ewan’s across the table. She knew he’d felt her sarcasm, as well. It felt as though they played a game they’d already lost. All they could do was play it with as much charisma and excitement as they could. It was as though they were drowning, yet had decided to sing their favourite songs just before they sank.

Of course, in this case, it was Marta who would be wrapped up in the Duke’s affairs. Nobody else would be required to sleep with him. Nobody else would be required to uphold a legal arrangement or bear his children or honour him, night after night.

It was enough to drive her mad.

Throughout lunch, Baldwin interjected only a few times. Each time, he seemed as though he struggled to find the joke that lurked just beyond the topic athand. In response, the Duke scoffed and said, “I think I very nearly understand what you wanted to do with that, Baldwin. Always such a clever chap.”

At this, Aunt Margaret’s eyes shone. It seemed she found the Duke’s remarks to be entirely kind, clever, armed with constant goodwill. It seemed impossible that she could ever perceive him in any negative light.

When lunch ended, Aunt Margaret suggested that they embark to the garden for a chat. However, to Marta’s surprise, the Duke stated that he had to return to work for the day.

“Thank you again for the pleasant company,” he said. “I do hope that you’ll welcome me to your home again soon.”

Aunt Margaret looked as though she might fall from her chair. “Oh, dear me. I had thought…” Her thoughts seemed to toss about in her skull. *Had it been the lamb? Had it been Baldwin? Had Marta not been beautiful enough?* Of course, Marta could only guess at what she thought.

“Ah! The upcoming party,” the Duke said. His eyes burned towards Marta’s. “I assume that you’ll all be in attendance.”

“Of course we will be!” Aunt Margaret blurted. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Mother. I don’t know if he meant…” Tatiana began.

“We’ll all be there,” Baldwin interrupted. “Don’t worry yourself.”

“Wonderful to hear, Baldwin,” the Duke returned. His eyes were cold. He stood from the table and marched to the doorway. Aunt Margaret hopped up and raced after him, her chest bobbing to and fro. When she reached the doorway, she gave Marta a frightening glare.

Marta knew: she was required to follow. Slowly, she stood and walked like a ghost towards the foyer. Once there, Aunt Margaret seemed to fawn over the Duke, while his eyes scanned her body up and down.

“Good afternoon to both of you,” he said. “Thank you again for the pleasant company.”

“Good afternoon. I look forward to our next meeting,” Marta recited. Her words felt harsh and flat against her tongue.

Still, she knew they’d been enough, at least for the moment.

When the Duke disappeared into his carriage, Aunt Margaret rounded towards her, her face scrunched and blotchy. “Whatever happened? Whatever did we do wrong?” She tore at her nails with her small teeth. “Perhaps the food was much more lacklustre than he’s accustomed to? Oh, but I got the cut of lamb from the very farm his cook ordinarily goes to.”

“Such research went into this, Mother,” Ewan called from the dining room, where it seemed everyone remained in rapt attention.

“I think it went splendidly,” Marta lied. “Truly.”

Aunt Margaret’s shoulders slumped. “So you think you—you feel some sort of…” She paused, then thought twice about the words. “He’s quite a handsome man, isn’t he?”

“Terribly handsome, Mother!” Ewan again called from the dining room.

Aunt Margaret grumbled to herself. She pulled her skirts high and marched towards the hallway and then disappeared in the dining room. Now, alone for the first time in many hours, Marta felt overwhelmed with the strange darkness that seemed to collect itself in her belly.

This man meant nothing to her.

Nothing at all.

Baldwin suddenly stepped out from the dining room. His black eyes found hers immediately. She wanted to scream at him, to demand why he’d allowed any of this to happen. But she pressed her teeth into her bottom lip and waited in stunned silence. In the far room, they could hear Ewan and Aunt Margaret begin a vibrant and false-sounding conversation, with Ewan asking her just how their father might feel with Aunt Margaret’s newfound crush on Lord Remington.

“You’re dastardly, dear son,” Aunt Margaret cried. “I cannot understand where you came from.”

Baldwin stepped closer to Marta. She swallowed and stepped back, as though his presence was such an alarm that she couldn’t bear to be too close. Her nostrils filled with his musk and her eyes fluttered closed, even as Ewan, Aunt Margaret, and Tatiana’s voices rose higher. They seemed to shift to some sort of argument, although Marta’s mind felty fuzzy and inarticulate. She couldn’t have echoed back what they said.

Marta found herself stretched out against the door. She was cornered. Baldwin stepped towards her, his motions sure and sturdy until he was only a few inches away. His nose was mere inches, and his lips parted only slightly, seemingly urgent with the singular desire to kiss her, press her body against the wood of the door, and grip her waist and ensure that a moan rippled out from between her lips and shuddered through him.

It was strange and foreign and illegal, operating like this. Baldwin’s hand pressed across her stomach, and every limb on her body shuddered with madness and excitement. Her eyelids crept down and closed her in, in a prison of her own lustful thoughts. Already, she allowed herself to forget about the wretched hours during which the Duke had attempted to claim her. With Baldwin’s hand pressed against her, she knew nothing else but him, her frantic heart, and the pulse between her legs.

With her eyes closed, she felt the first hint of Baldwin’s lips across hers. Her spine tingled; fire and chill seemed to join at the top of her shoulders and sweep across her breasts. Baldwin’s hand drew a line from her stomach towards those bulging breasts, his thumb tucked beneath the fabric, placed just an inch above her nipple. He owned her completely in body, mind, and soul. Yet how could they beat what

the Duke of Remington yearned for so completely?

The moment their kiss broke, her eyes fluttered open to gaze into his dark ones. She opened her lips to whisper his name, just as softly as she possibly could: “Baldwin. Darling Baldwin. Why? Why must this come between us? Isn’t there something you can do…”

But altogether too swiftly, there was a call from the dining room. Tatiana burst into the hallway, her cheeks blotchy, and her hands in fists. Just in time, Baldwin jumped back and turned around. The two watched as Tatiana stomped towards the back garden to fetch her children. When she reached the back door, she jumped around and hollered towards the dining room.

“Ewan! It’s no wonder you haven’t yet found a woman to marry you. You’re a wretched, obstinate creature, without a care in the world for anyone except yourself. Mother agrees with me, and it’s the reason she hasn’t fought to find you a suitor as of yet.”

“And you’re a right wretched woman who seems to lack any sort of love for your husband. The entire world is privy to your affair, Lady Tatiana. Understand that you’re not getting away with everything you perceive you are!” Ewan hollered back.

But already, Tatiana had flashed through the garden door and disappeared. Baldwin and Marta lent one another wide-eyed gazes. It was clear that they weren’t the only creatures in their world with gut-wrenching problems. Marta felt almost assured by this. How grand it was not to feel so alone.

Chapter 27

Ewan's love for Baldwin was an ever-present thing, something that Ewan accepted like he accepted oxygen for air. However, as he awoke on the morning of the next party, he felt strangely light, jumpier—full of possibility. Throughout the previous weeks, he'd watched Baldwin slowly dive into whatever love he currently simmered in for Marta. Even though his mother wanted nothing to do with the match, the view of Baldwin's courageous leap had thrilled him. He hadn't envisioned anything like this occurring in Baldwin's life, and perhaps due to his immense love for Baldwin, he felt thrilled by it. Baldwin very well might find happiness, after all; perhaps, then, Ewan could, too.

It was a lazy summer morning and an even hazier afternoon. Ewan stumbled into Marta in the garden with a book pressed across her breasts, and her eyes closed, her lashes fluttering across her cheeks. He stopped short and blinked down at the girl, whose lips seemed to form little words, the whispers so soft even she could surely hardly hear them.

"Are you making up some sort of poem, darling cousin?" Ewan asked.

Immediately, Marta's eyes popped open. She erupted from the blanket on which she lay and blinked at him, seemingly struggling to paint a picture of him due to the severity of the afternoon light. When she finally understood the weight of reality, she allowed her shoulders to fall and said, "Oh, Ewan. You must always tease me so, mustn't you?"

Ewan collapsed on the blanket with her and gazed up at the sterling blue sky. He tapped his fingers across his breast, feeling his cousin's

eyes upon him. Still, he stared at the blue, and then at the smallest tuft of a cloud, one that seemed diligent about its little parabola across the sky.

"I dare say my mother is quite thrilled with her new match," he said. "And you surely aren't thinking about going against her wishes."

"Had you some suspicion that I lay out here crafting some sort of scheme?" she asked.

Ewan shrugged. "I only know what I perceive between my dearest friend and my dearest cousin."

Marta fell back and seemed to settle deeper in the grass, as though she could tunnel herself six feet under and thus avoid all torments of courting. Ewan clucked his tongue.

"I know that you have a high level of perception, Marta. You see much more than you let on," Ewan continued. "And I'm grateful to you for living in the empathy of my situation and allowing me silence to process. It's proof that your kindness extends far beyond the words you speak."

Marta seemed to consider this for a long moment. Finally, she said, "I know what it means to be in love with someone who cannot love you back. It's one of the most wretched experiences I've had. I pray I never have to go through something like that again."

Suddenly, Marta rolled onto her side, her head propped up on her hand so that she could gaze fully at her cousin, her big blue eyes

enormous and eager to swallow up whatever information he wanted to allow her.

“Do you wish to fall in love with another?” she asked.

Ewan gave a soft, lacklustre shrug. “I can’t say.”

“I’ve found in recent weeks that the only way I can conquer previous heartache is through heartache from another,” she said, her voice mischievous. “Why don’t you allow me a bit of time at the party tonight to find you a meaningful woman? You won’t want to wait on the wisdom of your mother. It’s already quite clear to me that she operates via a rulebook of her own creation.”

“Margaret Thompson is a woman of incredible daydreams,” Ewan returned. “The thing that would truly destroy her, however, is the fact that I also operate from incredible daydreams. I know only my heart and the wild imagination of my own mind. Why would I want to exist elsewhere?”

**

That night, Ewan dressed in a fine suit, stretched the fabric down across his still-flat stomach, and ogled himself in the mirror. Although he’d forgotten it in recent months, especially throughout Baldwin’s newfound love for Marta, he truly was still an attractive man. There was something about the object of one’s love not loving one back that put such a sour taste in one’s mouth that called to mind a conclusion of not being quite good enough. There was something about understanding the weight of one’s disastrous life that allowed one to feel completely void of promise.

However, with Marta's resolution, Ewan felt only the strength to play along. He wasn't one to allow good opportunities to pass him by. Thus, he trotted down the staircase and joined his beautiful cousin, who flashed him a smile of promise and unending excitement. She wore a gorgeous yellow gown, the bottom half of which burst out like an egg moments after the crack. Her skin glowed, almost sparkled, like water beneath the sunlight.

"What is it about you Austrian girls that make you so outlandish when compared to the English?" he asked.

Marta batted her perfect lashes and guffawed. "I really can't imagine what you mean."

"Ah! Then perhaps that's still part of it. The idea that one must always play just a tiny bit the fool, hmm? If only to make the world believe that it's all come so simply."

"You really can be quite evil, can't you, Ewan?" she said with a pretty, musical laugh.

Although Baldwin had announced that he would attend the party while the Duke had been in their presence at the Thompson Estate, Ewan hadn't yet heard this to be a guarantee. In the past days, Baldwin had kept a wide berth from the estateto attend to his father's business affairs. Ewan's suspicion was that Baldwin didn't wish Marta to see this other, darker, shadowed side of himself, not after he'd crafted this lighter persona.

Just before Marta and Ewan opened the door to meet the carriage,

Ewan's mother bustled up from the back of the house. Of course, Ewan had forgotten that his mother had asserted herself into the situation, that she'd taken it upon herself to be a sort of chaperone for the seasonal ball. Marta shivered against Ewan's hand, which he'd placed across her back to guide her out of the house. It seemed clear to all parties that dear Margaret Thompson was an enemy to all parties. She wanted nothing with the brewing affection between Baldwin and Marta and would press Marta and the Duke together continually, surely to a comical degree.

Ewan's mother had, if possible, overdressed herself. She looked like an elaborate party cake with multiple tiers. Her cheeks seemed to leap out with overzealous rouge, and her large eyes looked almost monstrous, despite their normal mothering nature. She tugged her skirts a bit higher to show her outrageously tiny feet below.

"There you are! You hadn't planned to leave without me, had you?" she asked playfully.

"Never, Mother," Ewan said.

Marta made a strained little noise in the back of her throat, yet upheld her gorgeous grin. That moment, towards the back of the house, a volatile scream erupted. Ewan arched his brow towards his mother, who swatted her hand this way, then that.
"It's only Laura and the boys," she said. "You know, Marta, it's a funny thing. Now that the girl has a bit of English language to her, she seems to have improved her intelligence, as well. I've always imagined that England is the far superior country to Austria, not only based on your mother's letters, but also through various conversations with businessmen. They tell me, oh and I'm sure this won't hurt your feelings due to your English nature, my girl, but they tell me that there is a sort of banality there. An idiocy."

“Is that so?” Marta said. Ewan could sense she was on the verge of volatility herself, ready to blare her true feelings to her rather wretched, yet well-meaning auntie. “I have to say, after living there my entire life, I cannot believe I missed this.”

Her sarcasm was palpable. As usual, Ewan’s mother seemed to swim underneath it, able to craft a world she appreciated far more. A world more in-line with her innermost emotions and firmly-drawn lines.

The carriage ride proved to be more of the same. Of course, his mother was quite clear that she had hardly a care for Ewan’s romantic alliances, which gave her plenty of energy to declare her enjoyment for the Duke of Remington and blare excitement about their approach.

“I was in correspondence with him yesterday to ensure that he would be in attendance,” Ewan’s mother said.

“Mother, that seems terribly unnecessary,” Ewan said. “He told us himself around the dinner table that he would be.”

“One can never be too careful. In the issues of courting, I believe one must live on the side of caution at all times,” his mother returned. “Perhaps you wouldn’t understand this, Ewan, but Marta and I are women, and women must continually build lines in the sand. Regardless, I shouldn’t have been truly worried. It’s clear that Lord Remington has truly taken to you, darling. He answered back that he wouldn’t miss the party for all the world.”

“It’s truly assuring to know that our dear Duke has such an affection for the world of drink and dance,” Ewan said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “I, for one, would never want the county run without a healthy dose of alcoholism.”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Ewan, but I suppose I’ll agree with you if it means we’re on the same page,” his mother returned.

Ewan and Marta shared a big-eyed look. Seconds later, the large estate appeared, just beneath the canopy of trees that swept over the top of the country road. Marta gripped her skirts hard with white-tinged knuckles. Ewan felt a similar clench in his gut. It was remarkable to him that he could know Baldwin all his life and still feel this lurch of panic. Love was a sinister thing.

Still, the night felt different, alive in ways he’d forgotten were possible. A stablehand opened the carriage door and assisted Marta onto the path that led to the vibrantly-lit ballroom. A trail of gorgeous fabric led them up the steps and into the ornate and enormous room. When they entered, his mother gasped for air and gripped his elbow.

“I didn’t know it was required to move so quickly upon entering a ballroom,” she said. Her cheeks were pale, and her eyes glittered strangely.

“Didn’t mean to push you, Mother,” Ewan returned, arching his brow. “I assumed you knew what this event would demand of you.”

“Ewan, I can’t possibly understand…”

Suddenly, Baldwin emerged from the centre of the ballroom. He walked beside the red-headed Penelope Sussel and wore a slender smile across his face. His eyes didn’t follow the smile. Throughout Baldwin’s entirely brief affair with Penelope, he had never once

divulged any affection for the girl to Ewan. In fact, he'd largely avoided the subject throughout, even dipping around it when Ewan brought it up.

Marta seemed to stiffen at the sight of Baldwin with Penelope. Jealousy etched itself across her cheeks and forced her eyebrows down. However, the moment Baldwin's eyes found Marta's, it was clear where his endless affection remained. They stepped before Margaret, Ewan, and Marta. Penelope dipped into a splendid curtsy. Ewan found his eyes dancing across the gorgeous swell of her breasts. Her red hair caught the candlelight like a miracle, frantic with life-affirming light. For a strange moment, Ewan's heart bulged in his throat.

Throughout Ewan's teenage years and into his Baldwin-adoring adulthood, he'd frequently thought of women. He was human, a fluid creature who comprehended the brevity of gorgeous skin and beautiful eyes and the splendid nature of the youth of both himself and those around him. Although he'd wasted a good deal of his life pondering the vitality and power of his love for Baldwin, his eyes now fluttered, and his stomach pounded with want.

Penelope Sussel?

Of course, he'd flirted with her endlessly in the past. This had been his mechanism to ensure many didn't suspect his affection for Penelope. Throughout their brief courting, he'd never perceived Penelope to be any sort of competition. He knew Baldwin's heart better than that.

"Look at you two!" Ewan's mother chirped. "Have you decided to rekindle the old flame?"

Baldwin and Penelope flashed eyes at one another. Baldwin's face shifted uncomfortably. It seemed that the air between the five of them rushed out, unable to handle the tension.

"Don't you dare be so embarrassed," his mother continued. "I think it's marvellous. The two of you were always such a handsome pair."

"Penelope," Ewan interjected. He bowed slightly and gave her a confident grin. "Please, don't mind my mother. The moment she sees anyone, she immediately falls into a frenzy, attempting to stitch them together romantically with whoever happens to be around."

"Oh, yes. I'm quite familiar," Penelope said. Her laughter sparkled.

"We wanted to catch up a bit," Baldwin said. "I told her that I expected the two of you to be a bit tardy. Auntie Margaret, I'd forgotten to expect you. What a unique pleasure."

Only perhaps Ewan and Marta's ears were attuned to his personal brand of sarcasm. Ewan followed Baldwin's eyes towards Marta's. Marta's cheeks burned pink.

"Darling, look!" Ewan's mother blurted. She reached across Ewan to grip Marta's elbow hard. "The man of the hour. Of the year. Nay, of the decade!"

Lord Remington stood like a powerful and stoic statue towards the far end of the ballroom, in seemingly disinterested conversation with a rather beautiful raven-haired woman who looked at him as though he himself had hung the moon. His eyes skated across the ballroom and

found the five of them. He sputtered something to the woman beside him and then strode towards them, shoulders back, his face almost violent in its assuredness. Ewan had never hated anyone more. Of course, his own feelings were plastered across Baldwin's face. Ewan longed to press his hand against Baldwin's shoulder and whisper, "You must remember to focus your face. You look as though you're moments from murder."

"Lady Thompson," Lord Remington said, sweeping low to drop a kiss on Ewan's mother's cheek. "It's a marvellous thing that you came this evening for a bit of the fun. Ladies like yourself seem to make every excuse to remain home. You're no such lady."

"Oh, no. My mother? Never one to keep to herself," Ewan said.

Penelope's eyes found Ewan's at that moment. She lent him a secret smile, apparently grateful for his bizarre sarcasm.

"Good evening, Marta," Lord Remington said. He bowed his head and shot a direct gaze her way.

String instruments swelled to brew up another song. Lord Remington's lips opened, assuredly to demand Marta for a dance. However, suddenly, Ewan found himself blurt, "Marta! Please, do me the honour of dancing with me. I know the dogs will surely run after you immediately afterwards. But as your handsome cousin, I believe it my right to take you around first." He closed his right eyelid swiftly, in her direction—a wink to assert his deception towards his mother and Lord Remington. Marta's laughter fluttered.

"You're utterly shameless, darling Ewan," she said. She turned her eyes towards Lord Remington and said, "I suppose I've nothing to do

but agree to that sort of request."

Ewan collected his cousin. Together, they swept off across the ballroom, leaving the remaining three in a strange half-circle, void of proper conversation. Marta burst into laughter, her eyes shining.

"You knew he was prepared to ask me to dance in only a few seconds more," she said.

"Of course I did," Ewan assured her. "And I wanted to save you. I know how little interest you have in him."

"I know it's only a temporary solution, but I truly am grateful," Marta said. "He feels like a wolf, hunting me."

"Don't insinuate that you're some sort of small woodland creature," Ewan returned. "That's outside the bound of reason. You're a strong and capable creature…"

"A woman in a man's world," Marta returned with a sigh.

Ewan and Marta flung their feet through the gorgeous movements. After a long pause, Marta said, "He doesn't feel anything for her anymore, correct?"

"I assume you mean my mother and Lord Remington? That affair ended years ago," Ewan affirmed.

“Don’t be silly.”

“Ah! I suppose you mean Baldwin and that red-headed miracle of a woman,” Ewan said.

“Now you’re trying to play up my ravenous jealousy,” she said, smiling faintly.

“Baldwin wants nothing to do with her. That is a fact,” Ewan said. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“But you have some interest. Don’t you?” Marta asked.

“This intuition you think you have. It’s monstrous,” Ewan returned. “You believe yourself to be in tune with all the world.”

“Aren’t I?” Marta asked, chuckling.

“Perhaps,” Ewan affirmed. “If you must feel yourself to be correct at all times, I will allow you this small confidence. Penelope does strike me. She can be incredibly obstinate, surely. But there’s something about being one of the only people in the world who make her smile like that. All Baldwin ever did for her was fill her with rage.”

“I can’t imagine you bringing such darkness to a woman’s heart,” Marta returned.

“You flatter me yet again,” Ewan remarked.

Marta bit down on her lower lip, a clear sign of her frantic beating heart. “I cannot envision a healthy way out of this wretched evening. The object of my dear love is only just yonder, and yet your mother’s watchful eye will ensure that I remain in the arms of the Duke.”

“There is still a great deal of time between this day and whatever marriage my mother presumes to be scheming,” Ewan said. “Enjoy yourself. Remain light and confident and sure. Perhaps soon, Baldwin will discover a way to prove to my mother his worth in your life. Perhaps soon, she will see the true darkness that lurks within Lord Remington’s heart.”

The song ended far too quickly, casting both Ewan and Marta back to the anxiety-ridden arenas of their proper lives. The moment they returned to the group, Lord Remington hurried towards them and demanded a dance with Marta. She accepted with a resigned look upon her face. As she strung her arm through his, she cast her eyes towards Penelope and said, “You look quite beautiful today, Penelope. I dare say my cousin would be pleased to take you onto the floor with us.”

A shimmer of pink flashed across Penelope’s cheeks. Ewan flashed his hand across his hair and tugged it, then said, “I would enjoy a dance if it pleases you.”

“I thought the likes of Ewan Thompson would never deign to ask,” Penelope said.

“Ah! Am I so entirely pompous?” he returned.

Penelope didn’t answer and instead swept her arm through his and allowed him to guide her onto the floor. As they left, he made eye contact with Baldwin, who looked miserable, shadowed. He gave a firm nod, an assertion that it was quite all right with him that Ewan danced with Penelope. Immediately after, he cast a longing look towards Marta on the dance floor. Marta had her face lifted towards Lord Remington, who appeared to be in the midst of whatever grand tale he assumed would impress her the most. Ewan’s stomach shifted.

He eased Penelope towards the couple to dance close enough to hear.

“Your aunt has told me that I really should drop by more often,” Lord Remington said. “I think she has a bit of a crush on me.”

“Oh?” Marta returned. “That’s a grand thing. Have you asked my uncle if he might consider giving her up?”

Lord Remington’s laugh was pompous, strange, coming from high up in his throat. “I don’t suppose I’ve met anyone like you, Marta. I…”

But Penelope interjected, forcing Ewan’s attention back towards her. It was where he belonged, anyway. Her voice stuttered for a moment, proof that perhaps she was a bit more nervous than Ewan might have considered her to be.

“Baldwin seems terribly lonely, don’t you think?” she said. But immediately, she pressed her lips together and cast her eyes towards

the ground. The movement was so comical that Ewan laughed aloud, his belly quaking. “What is it?” she demanded, her eyes growing fiery.

“Nothing. You just brought up the only thing you didn’t wish to bring up, didn’t you? You didn’t want to bring attention to the fact that, well, you and Baldwin were once…”

“All right. Of course,” she said with a sigh. “You know me altogether too well, although I feel you’ve only come to know me through a very particular lens.”

Ewan’s heart jumped. “Are you suggested that you’d like to allow me to get to know you through a separate lens?”

She gave a light shrug with a gorgeous, glowing shoulder. “Perhaps I could see something worthwhile in that sort of thing. Although please remember. I’ve been burned before, and I won’t take kindly to that kind of thing again.”

Ewan felt as though his eyes might bulge from his head. Slowly, a smile spread between his cheeks as they swept across the floor, both seemingly enthralled with this sudden potential. Attraction billowed off of Ewan in waves, seeming to toss itself across Penelope, whose eyes glittered with mad excitement.

“You don’t suppose Baldwin will mind, do you?” she asked. Her voice was timid, mouse-like.

“I think Baldwin is entirely too practical for this sort of jealousy,” Ewan returned.

The music petered to a halt. Ewan's eyes flashed to the side to find Baldwin, his arms crossed over his broad chest, and his black eyes directed towards the Duke and Marta. Marta's smile was vibrant—difficult to decipher. Had the Duke's plot to win her affection triumphed? Ewan studied her face and noted her eyes: almost grey, despite the bright candlelight surrounding her. Perhaps this was an indication that all wasn't entirely well.

"Would you excuse me?" Ewan asked Penelope. "I'll find you later. Perhaps another dance won't hurt. We must avoid any sort of scandal." He said the final words with an air of sarcasm, as though anyone paid any close attention to Ewan Thompson enough to declare that he'd stepped over any line.

Ewan strode towards Marta. The Duke remained almost pinned to her, his chin directed towards her face and his pompous language seeing to steamroll over her. Marta's eyes brightened when she spotted Ewan.

"Hello, dear cousin!" she said, interrupting the Duke. His face turned sour upon Ewan's arrival.

"Marta, you speak as though we've spent many months apart, instead of only one song," Ewan said with a cackle.

"The Duke was only just informing me of his rather remarkable interest in paintings from the 1600s. Largely of, what was it, My Lord? Ships?"

"Battle weapons and armoured ships, yes," the Duke said, seemingy

unable to comprehend that Marta belittled him with fine-tuned insults.

"That sounds terribly fascinating, My Lord," Ewan said. His voice remained flat and void of emotion. "I dare say that there are plenty of those very such paintings in this mansion itself. Why don't you go and investigate?"

Lord Remington's ears perked up. He arched his brow towards Marta and said, "I don't suppose you'd like to take some sort of tour of the mansion with me? I'm sure it can be arranged."

Fear permeated across Marta's face. Ewan recognised that he'd pushed her into a wretched situation. It was clear Lord Remington was the sort of man to tug Marta into the darkest corner and attempt to have his way with her, regardless of whether she wanted the same.

Ewan cleared his throat and said, "I believe my mother wants a word with both of us, unfortunately. She only just passed me by and demanded I bring you for a bit of a chat. I dare say the old girl doesn't have much longevity this evening, what with her puffy feet. You understand, don't you, Lord Remington?"

Lord Remington did not, in fact, give the air of the sort of man who understood things as a rule. In fact, empathy was surely the sort of word he'd only heard once or twice, and nothing he'd managed to incorporate into his day-to-day. Of course, as the music swarmed the air once again, it seemed there was nothing for him to do but nod, give a sneer-like grin and say, "I suppose I'll catch you for another dance later, My Lady." He nodded gravely, as though this was a cross he had to bear in the pursuit of some higher purpose.

When they abandoned him, Marta gripped Ewan's hand and allowed her smile to fall, as though she dropped a bouquet of flowers upon the ground. Ewan recognised that her body quaked, something he could only tell from the tiny shaking of her fingers over his shirt.

Ewan's mother lurked in the garden, holding court over a tiny crowd of middle-aged party-goers. Ewan was impressed. Her voice bellowed out through the air over the high-cut hedges and shot up towards the bright, round moon.

"And that's when I told my beautiful sister, just send her to England! Austria is no place for a stunning English girl like Marta. Oh, you must have seen her. The Duke has really taken with her. Already, I have plans for a late-summer wedding, although it's difficult to say, isn't it? It's already late June. Time just slips away during the season. My heart aches for my own memories of it all. Yes, these are days that Marta will truly always uphold as some of the best of her life."

Hearing this, Marta squeezed Ewan's elbow harder. Ewan muttered, "The old bird was the reason you were sent here, hmm?"

"I suppose so."

"I wouldn't uphold it too much," Ewan said. "She very well could be lying to benefit herself. She's never been one to avoid sprucing up the truth when it behoves her."

"Here she is now!" Ewan's mother cried. She drew her hand out and swatted it around and then collected her fingers over Marta's shoulder. "Beautiful niece, you really must imagine yourself out on the ballroom floor with the Duke himself. It's prettier than any picture."

“I imagine nothing is grander than the paintings our Duke loves so dearly,” Marta said, her eyes faraway. “Large ships. Warfare.”

“What is that, darling?” Ewan’s mother gave a lacklustre shrug to the surrounding members of her brewing cult. “She’s always so imaginative, this one. I thought English people were the real storytellers, but it seems Austria has something we don’t.”

The conversation limped forward. Ewan wanted to keep Marta in the throng of other humans as long as he could if only so she could avoid any pestering—or worse—from Lord Remington. He felt as though he guarded her, body, soul, and spirit.

Yet he wasn’t sure how long he could take it. It was clear that his mother had a very serious grip on society as a whole. She yearned for nothing more than the union of Marta and Lord Remington and had deemed it as a personal project. Ewan could very well stand in the centre of the aisle at the cathedral service itself, press against Marta in an attempt to push her back into the street and beyond. But that sort of brute force would do him no service.

Perhaps he, Marta, and Baldwin had already lost.

Perhaps true love couldn’t win afterall.

Chapter 28

Rage swam up and down Baldwin's spine and stirred through his stomach. He sipped berry wine towards the edge of the ballroom. Ewan and Marta had sneaked out towards the garden with Aunt Margaret, fresh off Marta's elaborate and terribly heart-wrenching dance with Lord Remington. Now, only Penelope remained on the dance floor, seemingly continually casting strange glances his way. Moments later, just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, she approached and apologised for dancing with Ewan. This surprised Baldwin a great deal, as he hadn't considered Penelope in any sort of romantic sense in many, many months. In his mind, it had been a separate life, performed by two far different humans. The memories were jumbled images, garden light, and his awkward, pumping heart. Across everything had been the assured belief: it hadn't been what he'd wanted.

"Do you feel something for him?" Baldwin asked Penelope. He suddenly found no reason to beat around any sort of metaphorical bush.

Penelope's cheeks brightened. "I suppose there could be something there," she answered.

This answer seemed outside the bounds of reason for Baldwin. In his case, when he'd first interacted with Marta, he'd known only: *this creature is the one I wish to spend the rest of my life with. How on earth can I alter the course of my day to have just a thirty-second interval in her presence?*

Still, he recognised that not all people operated as he did. In his

world, everything was all-or-nothing: from his business to his romantic life.

It further surprised him that Ewan could have any sort of affection with anyone that wasn't himself.

"Ewan is one of the best men I've known in my life," Baldwin said, his voice booming over the music. He'd grown so terribly tired of string instruments. "Whichever woman is allowed to spend the rest of her days with him, I know she will be eternally blessed."

"Thank you for saying that, Baldwin. It really does mean a great deal to me to know that," Penelope said.

Lord Remington remained in seemingly disinterested conversation with another of his broad-shouldered and ominous, obstinate-looking friends. Baldwin excused himself from Penelope and marched into the garden, where the moonlight had flung its illumination over everything like a blanket. Marta's face was clenched tight, her lips in a fine line, reminiscent of an older woman's. The moment her eyes flashed across the crowd and found his, however, her face changed completely. Her supple lips parted. It seemed as though she translated several thousand thoughts through the air to penetrate his mind at this moment. It was clear: she had no interest whatsoever in Lord Remington. Her heart remained with Baldwin's. Yet as she slipped out from the crowd, Aunt Margaret's voice surged above the others' once more.

"Darling, wherever must you run off to?" she demanded. "I wish only to explain more of the fantastic origins of your life. All the trauma she had to go through prior to her arrival here in England. Darling, you really mustn't leave."

Marta's eyes didn't leave Baldwin's for a moment. She paused, seeming to stumble, her hands gripping her skirts. The pain shifted behind her eyes. Ewan's face shot back and forth, his eyes scanning the scene. Just when Baldwin thought that perhaps Marta wouldn't turn back to acknowledge her aunt, however, Lord Remington appeared, in all his grandeur and glory. Baldwin's heart sunk into his stomach.

"Lord Remington! What a remarkable pleasure to have you here with us," Aunt Margaret said.

"I wouldn't miss your company for all the world," Lord Remington said. He beamed towards Marta, whose face remained turned towards Baldwin. Slowly, Lord Remington's eyes found Baldwin, discovered the source of Marta's seeming want and happiness. His smile twisted and turned cruel. Nobody else seemed to notice. It was remarkable to Baldwin that Lord Remington was given the benefit of the doubt in so many instances. He supposed it came with title, with remarkable good looks combined with charisma. If Baldwin had bothered to be kind and interested in anyone beyond Marta and Ewan over the previous months, perhaps he, too, would have been regarded as such. He bowed his head towards Marta, an indication that she had to turn back, to join them. A small tear rolled down her cheek, which she immediately flicked away.

Ewan cut across the crowd and joined Baldwin, his hands crossed over his chest. Lord Remington began to tell the surrounding throng about his wild travelling tales, prior to taking on his title. Everyone except Baldwin and Ewan waited with bated breath. They were mesmerised.

"What will you do?" Ewan asked.

Baldwin clucked his tongue. "I think tonight might be a lost cause."

“Due to my mother?”

“Due to your mother,” Baldwin affirmed. “I don’t mean to be cruel, but she’s created a rather tepid environment for me. I don’t imagine I’ll make any headway this evening. Look at her. Crooning over him.”

“If only she were the young and vibrant blonde Austrian girl we see before us,” Ewan said with an ironic laugh.

Baldwin arched his brow. “You seemed rather hopeful this evening.”

Ewan gave Baldwin a tiny shrug. “To be quite honest with you, Baldwin, it’s clear what my feelings have been, but not entirely clear where they’re headed. I hope you’re not too pompous to understand I might take my affairs elsewhere.”

This was the first time in their history that Ewan had actually, genuinely, admitted his affection for Baldwin. He lent Baldwin a sombre smile then tilted his head towards the ballroom. “I might return to see if I might be honoured with a second. The second is where the real work begins. And if there’s anything I’ve learned from the many previous years of surveying the world of English courting, it’s nothing but hard work.”

He then patted his dear friend across the back and stepped out, back towards the ballroom and Penelope Sussel. Baldwin turned his eyes towards Marta a final time and reasoned that no, there was nothing yet to be done. He would collect his horse, and soon, he would be on his way. Surely, he would spend the majority of the following hours in

a state of unrest and stomachache. But it had to be done.

Chapter 29

Marta spent the following afternoon in a strange haze of sadness and wonder. She pressed her book against her stomach and lay back in the garden grass to blink up at the marvellous blue sky. It hadn't rained in days, which seemed to be some sort of English record, and the air felt cool and dry, almost like Austria mid-summer. As she lay back, she felt she could still feel the pressure of the corset from the previous evening. How dreadful it was, on some occasions, to be any sort of woman. The only thing she was good for was beautification. The only thing she was good for was to be traded off to a wretched and obstinate man.

When she and Baldwin had gazed at one another the previous night, mere moments before he'd abandoned her and left on horseback, she'd hardly been able to breathe. The attraction she felt for him wasn't reasonable; it felt outside of her control. When he'd disappeared, and she'd found herself again trapped in the arms of the Duke once more, she'd felt chilled to the bone.

Suddenly, Ewan appeared in the garden gate. He flung his arms out on either side of him and loudly pronounced, "Today is a perfect day for boating, I think."

Marta didn't dare move a muscle. The idea of being out on a boat was marvellous to her, something she missed with a dull ache about her life back in Austria. Ewan strode towards her and peered down, his hands on his hips. "Have you altogether passed from this world, Cousin Marta?" he asked her.

Marta clucked her tongue. "Always taking on every situation with

eight levels of sarcasm."

"I've informed you it's the only language I know to speak," he returned.

Marta sighed. "Wherever might we go boating, then?"

Ewan scrubbed his palms together. "Penelope has suggested that we take rowboats out on her father's lake."

"Penelope? My goodness. Things have really advanced."

Ewan didn't give her any sign that this embarrassed or thrilled him. He simply shot his head back towards the rusty gate and said, "We had better leave swiftly. I've already sent a letter to Baldwin to alert him of the goings-on."

Marta shot up, back straight, and her legs still extended. "Baldwin will come with us?"

"I can't comprehend a world in which he might not," Ewan returned. "He follows you around like a little puppy dog, doesn't he?"

"Won't it be strange with Penelope?" Marta demanded. She was apprehensive about any sort of triangle, any kind of bad-blood that lurked in the past. Suppose she'd walked into yet another situation like the one she'd had in Austria?

Ewan scoffed. “Baldwin and Penelope both used one another to pass the time. I believe they hardly think about that lacklustre past they have together. I wouldn’t worry your pretty Austrian head about it.”

Marta rolled her eyes, yet lifted her hand to allow Ewan to help her up. Her heart pounded as she retreated to the mansion to don another dress, one that highlighted her curves and thrust up her breasts and brought out the bright blue in her eyes. As she returned downstairs, she unfortunately ran headlong into Aunt Margaret, who barked, “What on earth are you wearing? You look remarkable. I hope you’ve some plan with Lord Remington that I haven’t yet heard about?”

Marta’s eyes searched the hallway. Almost immediately, Ewan shot out from the parlour and said, “Marta, Penelope, and I wish to spend some time together. Marta has agreed to be our chaperone.”

“Oh, but darling, doesn’t it make sense for you to invite the Duke?” Aunt Margaret said. She stitched her eyebrows together.

It was apparent to Marta that Ewan had left out the fact that Baldwin would be in attendance.

“Mother, you know that Penelope and I won’t have a good time if we must master conversation with the likes of Lord Remington,” Ewan said. “I know you’ve got yourself all wrapped up in Marta’s courting, but, darling Mother, I very well may be on the path to love myself.” He rose up and dotted a kiss across his mother’s cheek, an act that caused her to shriek with laughter.

It had been the perfect way to rid them of her questions.

Ewan and Marta boarded the carriage. Throughout the journey, both seemed lost in their own tumultuous thoughts. Marta allowed herself to be rocked about by the wild carriage, with her hands clamped together as the wheels circled almost violently over the rocks and dirt. She was frightened that she had built up this whole idea that Baldwin would join them, only to be disappointed. All evening and morning, she'd thought that perhaps she'd lost him. Perhaps he'd assumed that the race was lost, that he should step away from her and never return.

"Are you nervous?" she suddenly asked Ewan.

Ewan nearly burst from his seat. His eyes bulged out, seemingly rolling around of their own accord. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"About Penelope," she returned.

"Of course I am," Ewan sputtered. "What an outrageous question. Suppose she discovers that I'm a strange man with strange… emotions. Suppose she discovers all the chaotic stickiness of my insides."

Marta chortled. "I know it seems difficult right now, Ewan, but it's healthy to remember that nearly the entire kingdom is privy to your strange ways. Penelope has invited you here regardless of all of that. I think all will be well."

When they arrived at Penelope's estate, the butler led them to the garden to find Penelope herself, dressed in a gorgeous yellow

daygown, her breasts lifted, and her eyes alight. She gave almost no indication that she knew Marta was there at all. Rather, she stood and raised her hands to press them across Ewan's.

"I trust your journey was well?" she asked.

"Rather, yes," Ewan affirmed. "The only dreadful thing was the companionship."

Penelope gave a confused laugh, then turned her eyes towards Marta. "Marta, I'm so grateful you joined us today. Ewan says that Baldwin will also be in attendance?"

"This is what I've been informed, but I haven't yet…"

Almost as though he'd waited for this cue, Baldwin emerged from the garden gate: broad-shouldered and dark, his eyes like daggers towards Marta's. She felt pinned in her current stance, unable to move. Baldwin strode towards her. She felt conscious of her eyes filling with tears, yet knew not what to do about it.

After a strange silence, Baldwin said, "Thank you again for the invitation. I haven't been on a rowboat in years."

"Not since we were prone to tipping them over," Ewan affirmed. "I remember that day fondly. Mother nearly tore my ear off; she was so angry. Apparently, I ruined a pair of pants."

Out towards the lake, two rowboats had been gathered and lay in wait for the foursome. Marta's hand fluttered across Baldwin's as they strode behind Ewan and Penelope. It seemed that Ewan had decided, in his nervousness, to simply squeeze himself dry of conversation, not allowing even Penelope to answer his reckless questions. Marta and Baldwin exchanged glances and smiled. It was a funny thing, watching Ewan fall in love.

Penelope and Marta both sat in separate rowboats whilst the men eased the boats into the water and then leapt in at the final moment. When Baldwin was safely in the seat of the rower, he placed his hands over the oars and swept them through the water with such grace and strength that Marta felt unable to breathe. Within minutes, they'd cast themselves away from Ewan and Penelope. From afar, it seemed that Penelope and Ewan had a bit of trouble getting started.

"Ewan has never been one of the sportier men I've known," Baldwin said with a charming smile.

"I don't suppose I would have considered him a healthy rower myself," Marta affirmed. "Although listen. If you listen close, you can hear Penelope laughing."

"I must tell you. She hardly let out a single laugh throughout our entire history," Baldwin said. "In case you wondered at all about it."

Marta nodded and bit her lower lip. "I had a moment of fear about it." Why had she told him that? "But then decided instead to trust in you. You seem to understand the weight of my emotions for you."

There was silence between them. Only the slosh of the oars in the water filled their ears. Slowly, he eased them still further from Ewan

and Penelope, so that they went beyond a little bank, on which several trees had grown. Marta shivered as they cut behind them. Now, nobody on the planet could see them. They were alone, in the centre of a gorgeous and still body of water. They had their secrets; they could make still more.

"When I left last night, I need you to know I did it so that your own confusion would lessen," Baldwin said. His voice was low, almost a growl.

"I know," Marta whispered. "I told myself you just wanted to bide your time. I know we can find a way through this. We have to." She swallowed and pressed her hands against her cheeks. "All my life, I feel I've searched for someone like you. Now, to be told that I have to spend my days with this wretched Duke… it's akin to a death sentence."

"Marriage is a bit of a death sentence, isn't it?" Baldwin returned.

"I hope that I don't perceive it that way if I am allowed to spend those years with you," Marta whispered.

They studied one another's eyes for a long time. Marta felt overwhelmed with the want that seemed to stir in her stomach. Suddenly, she shot forward, so that she splayed either leg on either side of his waist. The rowboat tilted slightly, then steadied itself as she kissed him. His hands remained on the oars, and then dropped them and grabbed her hard. His mouth opened, and his tongue forced her lips open, and a moan escaped from deep within her throat. They kissed just as they had the impossible time against the garden wall, knowing fullwell that their time was limited, that their bodies had to do what they could until they were squashed back into the horrible parameters of their ordinary lives.

Baldwin's hands traced up her back and around the bodice of her dress to find the swell of her breasts. With a quick tug, he brought the nipples out into the air and squeezed them, first tenderly and then with enormous force. The pain shot through her spine and stirred with the lust that ached between her legs. She groaned and tilted forward, so that she could feel the thick bulge beneath the fabric of his trousers.

He broke the kiss and whispered in her ear, "I want you all to myself forever."

Marta's heart raced. How was it possible to want something that was so outside the bounds of what society deemed correct? Her Aunt Margaret felt like a force more powerful than the sun itself. She cuddled closer to him, her forehead against his shoulder. Slowly, he inched beneath her and kissed her breasts gently, his tongue finding the nipple. His eyes closed as his fingers swept up beneath her skirts and flirted over the soft skin of her thighs and waded through the formidable fabric of her underthings. Finally, he found the tender wetness between her thighs, the soft yet powerful button that, once pressed, cast Marta into impossible delights. With his finger against her, she cast her head back and allowed another moan to escape. This one was animal-like and powerful; the sound skated over the lake and swept between the trees. She gyrated as he rubbed his fingers against her, pulling her up into some sort of heavenly feeling, one impossible to describe with words. This was the pure next step of falling in love. This was their ability to step outside reality and into a world of their own creation.

But of course, this world couldn't exist for long. Seconds later, the oars slipped out from their hooks and dropped with dunk-sounds into the water. Marta broke the kiss and blinked out to watch them float away, leaving their rowboat without any mechanism to return to shore.

“Oh no!” Marta cried. “What shall we do?”

Baldwin belly-laughed. “I’ve never been in such a situation.”

“We’ll surely drown out here. No one will save us,” Marta said. Her voice had shifted, turned far more playful than she remembered it being, even with her previous lover.

Baldwin chuckled. It seemed neither of them could stop their reckless laughing. “It’s almost as though we should have rowed on this lake with another couple. Oh, yes. Wasn’t that precisely what we did?”

Suddenly, there was a shout. Another rowboat appeared on the other side of the embankment. It seemed that ultimately, Penelope and Ewan had switched places, with Penelope in the rowing seat. Marta was surprised to find that this didn’t confuse her at all. Penelope looked strong and regal and beautiful in the top seat, whilst Ewan looked particularly pleased to do nothing at all.

“Penelope! Has he conned you into doing all that work?” Baldwin cried, while Marta eased back into her seat on the other side of their rowboat to balance it. She watched the oars as they drifted further away.

“You know that any sort of hard labour makes me irritable!” Ewan returned.

“I know it all too well. Penelope, you’ve done yourself a unique service, allowing him to sit around doing nothing at all,” Baldwin returned.

“Believe me, I know,” Penelope said. “He started his relentless complaining minutes into the rowing, and I sensed that we had to switch, lest I throw him overboard. Shall you join us as we row yonder? There are usually some baby ducks on the other side of the lake. I also saw a badger the previous week.”

Baldwin and Marta exchanged glances and again burst into laughter.

“What is it? What’s so funny?” Ewan called.

“Unfortunately, we’ve lost our oars!” Marta returned.

Ewan and Penelope’s eyes bulged. “How on earth did you manage that?” Penelope asked.

“It’s quite a long story,” Baldwin affirmed.

“I daresay it isn’t so long. It’s only been about ten minutes since you disappeared around this embankment,” Ewan returned.

“Such specifics. Regardless, we need your assistance in retrieving our oars. Would you mind?” Baldwin asked.

“That’s a tricky thing indeed,” Ewan said. He turned back towards Penelope, mocking them. “Do you think we should allow them to float

about without rhyme or reason for the rest of their days? Or do you suppose we should put them out of their misery?"

Penelope giggled. "It's a tricky question. After all, they've done this to themselves, haven't they?"

Ultimately, Penelope and Ewan rowed in a massive circle around the other couple, lifting their oars out of the water and passing them back gingerly, ensuring that neither of them fell into the water themselves. Baldwin slid the oars back into their positions and gave Marta a firm nod.

"I suppose this means we can be on our way again," he said.

"How wonderful," Marta said, although her voice felt hollow. Ultimately, she'd wanted nothing more than to remain oarless, in various stages of undress, with Baldwin Terrence. She'd wanted his fingers to bring her to that impossible, orgasmic glory. She'd wanted to feel nothing but the water below and the sky above them.

But the day was no less lovely. The four of them rowed towards the far end of the lake, where they watched little fuzzy ducks float past, their beaks dipping into the lake to sip water, quacking quietly as they floated. Marta placed her hand in the water and watched her fingers as they floated back and forth. Beneath the surface, they seemed light green.

"It's remarkable that you have this at your disposal all the time," Ewan told Penelope. "Many would kill for such land, complete with a lake and a wild forest around it."

“It was a beautiful thing to grow up here,” Penelope affirmed. “I always felt that the forest was this gorgeous thing I wanted to explore all morning and afternoon. My parents did their best to pull me back inside, teach me a few manners. But I longed for the water and the air and the animals. Even now, look! There he is. The badger.”

All four cut their eyes towards the meandering beast, who paused on the other side of a massive oak and peered at them with distrustful eyes. They’d wandered into his world with their own opinions and language.

“He probably thinks we’re monsters,” Marta murmured.

After the badger wandered away, the quartet latched their boats to the tree and found a small clearing, where they set up a picnic. Penelope had packed berry wine and freshly-baked bread and fresh cheeses and little cured pieces of meat and raspberries, blackberries, and blueberries. The spread was miraculous. The berries caught the light and seemed to echo back their immense health and vitality. Marta placed a raspberry on her tongue and squished it, eyes closed. She felt every single tiny explosion of the little sections. She felt every single seed.

The day was a blissful one. This was the only possible word Marta could use to describe it. At various points of the afternoon, Baldwin splayed his head in her lap, telling little stories and making everyone from Marta to Ewan to Penelope burst into laughter.

“I never imagined you to be such an orator, Baldwin! I suppose it matters who keeps your company,” Ewan said, flashing a smile towards Marta.

It seemed clear that Marta had been the one to change everything. This both thrilled and frightened her. She'd never envisioned herself to have such power.

As the day crept to a close, the four of them loaded back in the rowboats and returned to Penelope's mansion. Throughout the rowing, Marta couldn't help looking at Ewan's face. He was perpetually enamoured with Penelope, big-eyed and wide-faced and quick to come up with some sort of joke to make her laugh. Marta couldn't have envisioned how happy it made her to watch Ewan fall in love. It was one of the bigger surprises of her life.

Marta walked Baldwin to the stables to bid him goodbye. There, in the sacred silence of the shadows, he kissed her again. She wanted to plead with him, to demand he tell her when they would find a way to one another forever. But she knew there was no answer to this horrible question. He crept over to his horse and then nodded a final time. It seemed too painful to speak in these moments. His horse raced out across the moors as tears dripped down Marta's face. In this strange, painful moment, she heard Ewan call her name from near the house. It was already time to return to their home.

In the carriage on the way back, Ewan spoke endlessly about his fascination with Penelope. "She told me things today she's never told anyone," he said. "I feel as though we've crossed over some sort of boundary that couples are meant to maintain, even into husband and wifery. It's as though we've been waiting for one another this entire time."

Marta felt the same about Baldwin. She hesitated, then opened her lips.

"I know. I know it's what you two have, as well," Ewan said. "And I

know it must be terribly painful to know that there's no clear path to the happiness you so crave. Stay patient. Stay alert. Somehow, someway, your love will come to fruition. You will find a path to happiness. There's no other alternative."

Aunt Margaret perched in the garden with her hands collected over a walking stick and her eyes eagle-like, watching as the two approached. She waved them over, her eyes dancing between the two of them.

"How was your afternoon?" she finally asked, cutting through the strained silence.

"It was beautiful," Marta said. She felt overcome with it, knowing that she couldn't fully divulge what had happened, as Baldwin had been their secret. "Ewan and Penelope were fine company. We went rowing across the lake."

Aunt Margaret's eyebrow rose high. "Three of you in a single rowboat? It seems outlandish."

It was clear she suspected something. Marta knew she'd crossed a line. Her eyes flicked towards Ewan, hunting for assistance. Ewan shrugged and said, "We put Marta in the centre. She's quite light, and it did nothing for our buoyancy. I'm a seasoned rower, Mother, and I brought us easily across the water. No trouble at all."

"I see," Aunt Margaret said, stitching her brows together. "This afternoon, I sent a servant to Baldwin's estate, but the servant reported that Baldwin was out on an appointment."

“Why did you wish to see Baldwin, Mother?” Ewan asked.

Aunt Margaret allowed her shoulders to drop. For a moment, she stuttered.

“You assumed that we invited Baldwin along without telling you, didn’t you?” Ewan said.

“That’s ridiculous,” Aunt Margaret returned.

“I don’t think it’s outside the bounds of what you might do to ensure you get your way,” Ewan said.

“Don’t you dare say something like that to me!” Aunt Margaret blared.

A pit formed in Marta’s stomach. Aunt Margaret clearly didn’t trust them, and she had good reason not to. However, it seemed she only suspected them and had no true facts to back up her claim. She clucked her tongue.

“Regardless,” she said, sensing that she’d drawn a ridge between the three of them, “It’s good to have you back. Dinner will be served within the hour. I requested that the Duke join us, and he has agreed.”

The pit in Marta’s stomach seemed to grow heavier and more pointed with each passing moment. She and Ewan exchanged glances.

“I suppose this means I had better change for the night,” Marta said. Her voice was flat, lacking in any sort of emotional drive.

“And I suppose that means I had better make an excuse to get out of it altogether,” Ewan affirmed.

“Do whatever you like, Ewan. I dare say your sarcasm isn’t welcome at the dinner table tonight. If you do decide to join us, I must ask you to remain committed to intellectual and civilised conversation,” Aunt Margaret said.

Within the hour, Marta, Ewan, Aunt Margaret, and Laura sat around the dinner table. Marta had donned a dark cranberry frock, one she knew her Aunt Margaret appreciated (for wasn’t the wearing only for her aunt, anyway?) and curled her hair once more. Despite her orchestrated beauty, she felt like a shadow of the afternoon version of herself. She only felt whole when in his company.

“My Lord, it’s terribly kind for you to join us once more,” Aunt Margaret said. She lifted her fork, on which only a slight bit of potato lay. When she took a bite, she looked surprised at her thoughtlessness. Her cheeks flashed pink.

“It’s kind of you to invite me,” Lord Remington returned. “You know that I’ll stop at nothing to spend a bit more time at the Thompson Estate.”

Aunt Margaret tittered. Marta and Ewan kept their eyes on their food. Laura, who’d advanced spectacularly in the English language in the previous week, said, “If you are a lord, do you also know the queen?”

Lord Remington burst into unkind laughter. Marta flashed him a horrid glare, one he didn't recognise.

"I'm sorry, my dear, I don't mean to laugh," Lord Remington said. "I have never experienced such accented English."

"She's only just learnt," Marta affirmed. "She came to this country without a single syllable of the English language, and now she is brave enough to ask you a question. I find that remarkable."

Aunt Margaret furrowed her eyes. Marta knew she'd stepped far over the line of propriety in alerting the Duke of his lack of manners.

"I see," the Duke returned. He blinked at Laura, interested. "She doesn't seem to follow the conversation so well, does she?"

"She does," Marta insisted. "And she doesn't take kindly to being spoken about as though she's not even here."

The Duke guffawed. Aunt Margaret fluttered her hands and whispered, "Dear me."

But Ewan blurted, "Marta has been the one to teach her. Marta, would you say there have been challenges in translating the languages you've known since birth to another?"

Marta was grateful for the intellectual question. It distracted her from the horrors before them. She pondered for a moment and said, “English is quite simple when compared to German. Some of the complexities in the grammar are lost in English. As such, Laura can snip off some of the wretched extra fluff of her mothertongue and build English sentences quite easily. Can’t you, Laura?”

“I find it to be a silly language,” Laura said. Her cadence remained strange, as though she tried out the words, tasted them, and then felt unsure if they were proper or in the right order.

“I suppose we never really think about our own language in this manner,” Ewan said.

Already, Lord Remington seemed bored with the conversation. He shrugged and said, “I thank the Lord every day for being born in England. It’s truly the greatest place in the world.”

“Hear, hear,” Aunt Margaret blared.

Marta flared her nostrils and gave Laura a big-eyed, well-meaning look. She hoped to translate just how little she cared for Lord Remington.

“I imagined that dear Baldwin Terrence would be in attendance this evening,” Lord Remington said then. “I know he’s never so far from either Ewan or Marta. The three of you seem attached at the hips.”

Aunt Margaret tittered. “It’s really not so frequent any longer, My

Lord. Baldwin recognises that Marta is here for the reason of courting. He …"

"I wish he had joined us," Marta blurted then. She couldn't fully help herself. "He's always pleasurable company. He comprehends the weight of language, certainly. Ewan, wouldn't you agree?"

Ewan's eyes bulged. He seemed unable to answer.

"I don't suppose it matters what he thinks of language, only that it's improper in these days and times for Baldwin to spend so much time here," Aunt Margaret affirmed.

"It's a sad thing when eras end," Lord Remington said.

"I dare say he'll be here tomorrow and the next," Marta blurted.

Why couldn't she shut her lips? She was giving the game away. Memory of their gorgeous day on the water flooded her. She felt it impossibly horrid to discredit those hours. She wanted nothing to do with this mouldy conversation. She pressed her hands hard against her thighs and inhaled.

"Marta, you know how busy Baldwin is with his father's business," Aunt Margaret said. Between the lines, she seemed to suggest: *how dare you bring this up. How dare you extend this lacklustre conversation. How dare you press your luck.*

“I’m terribly sorry. I think I must have eaten something off during our picnic today,” Marta said suddenly. “I really must be excused.”

Aunt Margaret’s eyes bulged. She dropped her fork with a loud clack and drew her fingers together. “Shall I call for a doctor, Marta?”

“It’s not necessary. I need only rest,” Marta returned. She rose from her dinner chair and swept towards the hallway, her heart racing. At the doorway, she paused and turned towards Lord Remington. She knew her anger wasn’t entirely fair. Lord Remington was a selfish and arrogant beast, but it wasn’t as though he could force her to marry him. This was all tied up in Aunt Margaret’s expectations. She could put the blame nowhere but upon her shoulders.

“Thank you for the fine company,” Marta said, tilting her head. “I look forward to the next time we can sit around together and have such provocative conversations about the use of language and how it alters the course of our thoughts and the fluidity of our lives. Good night.”

The fire of her own sarcasm shot through her. She spun around and hustled up the stairs to find solace on her mattress. Once there, she fell into reckless sobs, the likes of which she found impossible to stop until she spontaneously fell into slumber. She did not dream.

Chapter 30

When Margaret Thompson had been a girl, she would have found it outlandish ever to disobey her mother or father or go out of her way to be obstinate and rude. Now, as she sat beside the handsome and powerful Duke, watching her gorgeous and wretched niece hustle out of the dining room--seemingly uninterested in the enormous sacrifices Margaret had made throughout her life, nor in how those sacrifices now played up Margaret's decision to assist Marta on her quest to glory—Margaret's stomach churned with anger.

Now, it was left to her to assuage the Duke. He'd come there with Marta in mind, and now, she'd marched out of the dining room without lending him a last look of any sort of longing. No, it seemed clear that she wanted nothing to do with him. Still, Marta was young and multi-cultural and, generally, confused. Margaret wasn't one to give up easily. If she were, she wouldn't have made it as far as she had in this life.

Ewan's lips had fallen open in genuine shock. Even Ewan, her silliest child, couldn't believe how Marta had acted at the dinner table. Laura, that foolish Austrian child, continued to eat as though nothing had happened. If Margaret had had any sort of say in the matter, she would have kicked the girl out of her estate that moment. Still, her husband had told her time and time again, Margaret would officially ruin her relationship with Marta, should she require such an action. So, she powered through these wretched dinners with the likes of Laura. When she spoke English, Margaret's stomach gurgled with anger. It was ridiculous how she could tear through the English language in such a manner. She made herself sound like a fool.

"I'm terribly sorry about my niece," Margaret heard herself say, her cheeks burning.

Lord Remington arched his thick brow. “It’s nothing. I know she’s a difficult girl to understand.”

“I believe they do things differently in Austria,” Margaret continued. “It’s impossible for me to comprehend what she might do next.”

Ewan cleared his throat. Margaret and Lord Remington cast him dark looks. Ewan shrugged and said, “I suppose I’ll excuse myself.” As he left, he muttered to himself, “A man must know when he’s not wanted.” In Margaret’s mind, she wasn’t sure if Ewan spoke of himself or of Lord Remington.

Regardless, it didn’t matter much if Lord Remington was wanted or not. He would marry Marta, one way or another.

Laura continued to eat, seemingly without pleasure and without knowledge of the goings-on. Margaret rolled her eyes and said, “I don’t think she understands a word we say.”

“I don’t suppose so either,” Lord Remington said. He let out an ironic, unkind laugh. It was representative of Margaret’s feelings. “Regardless of her presence, I suppose we have a great deal to discuss.”

“I suppose we do,” Margaret said, heaving a sigh.

“Your Marta wants very little to do with me. It’s clear why that is. She’s rather taken with Baldwin Terrence,” Lord Remington said.

“I tried to rectify that. I had a discussion with Baldwin myself. He insisted that he wants nothing to do with her beyond friendship.”

“Yes, well. I imagine that’s not precisely true,” Lord Remington returned. “He seems the sort of man to lie and scheme his way to get what he most desires.”

“Baldwin?” Margaret whispered, a bit shocked. “I’ve known the boy throughout nearly his entire life. I can’t imagine that he…”

“It doesn’t matter what we can imagine here at this table, Margaret. We have the facts. Baldwin and Marta wish to be together, but I’m taken with Marta, and I know she will be my wife. I need something. Something to ensure she will eventually be mine.”

Margaret considered this, chewing her lower lip and feeling lost, a ship out to sea. She’d never envisioned this sort of conundrum, not when she’d initially dreamed up this match. At the time, she’d been incredibly proud of this decision, sensing that this would both please and impress her sister, so far away in Austria. Throughout their girlhood, they’d had a great deal of competition between them. When her sister had eventually moved across the continent, Margaret hadn’t been sure if that had meant she’d won or lost. Certainly, Margaret had been allowed to “keep” England but her sister had discovered a far different universe, a world Margaret could hardly visualise.

“I can’t envision a world in which Marta would choose Baldwin over yourself, My Lord,” Margaret tittered.

“We’ve arrived in that very world, Margaret. You must see it,” Lord Remington shot back. “Please, don’t bore me with your inability to think clearly. We must take positive action towards this unique goal.”

Margaret hummed and traced through her thoughts. Did she have something against Baldwin? Something that might remove him from the equation once and for all? Certainly, she’d known him countless years, enough to generate something dark against him.

Suddenly, the thought sprung up, like a seedling bursting from the soil, with all the optimism of becoming a tree.

“I’ve remembered something,” she said. Her eyes widened.

“What is it?” Lord Remington demanded, impatient. He tapped his lips with a napkin and studied her.

Margaret had the strangest impression that he detested looking at her. She supposed this was because she’d grown so incredibly old in previous years. Shestudied her face in the mirror and felt no passion.

“Baldwin is the first cousin to the Regent,” Margaret continued, attempting to press forward from this wretched thought.

“Is he?” Lord Remington returned, his eyebrows low. “Neither of them seem particularly interested in the other. It’s as though they’re complete strangers.”

“Oh, but they are,” Margaret returned. “They spoke a bit more often as children, but also recognised the distance between their sensibilities and kept a wide berth. Ironically, perhaps, I believe Marta to be entirely different from Baldwin. This difference seems to have brought them together…”

“I don’t wish to hear more about Marta’s stirring lust for Baldwin,” Lord Remington burned back.

“No, no. Of course not,” Margaret returned. “But the fact that Baldwin is the Regent’s first cousin brings us to a technicality. Officially, this means that Baldwin is required to follow the marriage act. In this case, he must receive permission from this regent to marry anyone at all.”

Lord Remington pressed his lips together for a long time, studying her. Margaret’s official words churned between them, making the air simmer. Off to the side, Laura clanked her fork on her plate and smeared her napkin across her lips.

“May I be excused?” she asked, in that same horrid Germanaccent.

“Of course, darling,” Margaret returned. She’d genuinely forgotten the girl remained amongst them.

Laura shot from her seat and whisked off towards the hall. All the while, Lord Remington gaped at Margaret, stirring the information through his mind.

“This is quite good to know, Margaret,” he finally said. “Quite good to

know indeed. I don't know quite how I'll use it. Not yet. But I know one thing: it means Marta and Baldwin have no chance at a life together."

"Hear, hear," Margaret said, lifting her water glass into the air. Sunlight crept through the glass and cast strange shadows and light across the wall. She studied the artistry of it, the strange way that light flung itself everywhere, guided by invisible properties she could never fully understand.

"You've given me a great deal to think about," Lord Remington continued. He stood back from his chair and beamed down at her—the last remaining person at the table. "I must excuse myself at this moment to ruminate. But I'm rather sure I'll see you soon."

Moments later, Margaret found herself alone, her hands stretched across her thighs and her platter only half-eaten. She'd chased away every single person she loved at the table; she'd proven herself to be in allegiance with the Duke. But wasn't that what she wanted?

Yes. Sometimes, as a mother, as an aunt, it was necessary to make yourself into a sort of villain. People didn't always know what was good for them. Slowly, Margaret returned her attention to her food, choosing instead to be pleased with her decisions and actions.

In a year, in two, she and the Duke and Marta would sit together and laugh about this strange and rotten time. "Thank you terribly, Auntie, for pushing me towards my greatest accomplishment in this life," Marta might say. "Lewis is the love of my life. I can't believe I didn't see it before."

Chapter 31

It was a funny thing, the passage of time. As the weeks drifted into July, Ewan found himself alight and passionate in ways he hadn't envisioned. He spent a decent amount of time with Penelope, who, as days passed, seemed to grow bored of his inability to, say, row boats or perform masculine duties. Ewan hated to admit it to himself, but he'd grown bored of her, as well. Their story had been one of sunny days and brilliant sunsets; it hadn't the longevity he'd craved.

He explained this to Baldwin one afternoon while out riding. Baldwin considered this, his brows furrowed.

"Poor Penelope," he said finally. "We've both decided against her."

"The thing of it is, Baldwin: I believe she's decided against me, as well," Ewan affirmed. "The only thing this has built up in me is the understanding that I want love in my life. The idea of it filled my heart with longing."

Baldwin nodded. Suddenly, he flung his leg over the side of the horse and stood in the space between the two mighty beasts, his eyes across the moors.

"If you keep at it, you'll find it. At least, that's what I want to believe," he said.

Throughout the past weeks, Ewan had done his best to ensure that Baldwin and Marta were allowed space and time together, alone. He made excuses for them, spoke atlength with his mother about boring topics he cared little for if only to distract her. He knew that Baldwin and Marta had grown in love for one another, creating the sort of love Ewan so craved.

“I don’t know how we’ll manage it,” Baldwin muttered, now dipping into his own chaos, “But I will ask her to marry me before the summer is through. Hear me. Know that this is so. Perhaps we will run away to be together. At this point, I would throw it all away for her.”

“He came over again last night,” Ewan murmured, speaking, of course, about the Duke.

“Marta wrote me about it,” Baldwin affirmed. “I told her that it isn’t her fault, that of course, we have to uphold old traditions before we decide what to do. I know she knows I plan to propose. I pray she’s equally willing to throw it all away.”

“She’s already been forced to throw away her life in Austria,” Ewan said. “I suppose another life thrown-out would do nothing to her.”

“I hope you’re right,” Baldwin returned.

The two men split up after that: Ewan riding back to his estate, his heart dripping into his belly and lips sombre. When he arrived, there was a letter awaiting him. He was surprised, yet pleased, to find the letter to be from Penelope Sussell herself.

Dearest Ewan,

We've had the sweetest time, but I must tell you that I find no future in our hearts combined.

Thank you for the sunshine and the laughter. Perhaps we can come together one day as friends. I wish you luck.

Penelope

Ewan read the letter in the garden. He folded it and slipped it into his breast pocket, praying he would remember to destroy it. It wasn't the sort of thing he wanted to run into later, a memory of another thing lost. Already, it seemed he'd lost so much. When he tried to analyse his affection for Baldwin, even, he found that he couldn't fully feel it as he once had.

There was a screech from behind the garden. Ewan's ears perked up as he rose and shuffled out of the garden gate. When he appeared between the hedges, he found Laura,Malcolm, and Walter amid a reckless game of ball. Laura held the ball above her head, her hands gripping it as she spewed German to the two children beneath her.

Whatever she said, it seemed hard-edged and wild—yet her smile was sterling and bright.

Ewan felt he'd never seen a more beautiful creature in all his life.

Suddenly, she dropped the ball onto the ground and let out a big, boisterous laugh. Ewan had never heard such laughter come from such a tiny woman. Malcolm and Walter scrambled for the ball, fighting over it, as Laura approached him. Her eyes were alight, her smile unfading.

"We always make too much noise, don't we?" she said. "Your nephews, they are, how you say? Quite…"

"Insane?" Ewan returned.

"I don't know this word," she said. "But whatever it is, I'm sure I agree with it."

Ewan chuckled. "Your English is much better."

Laura blushed. "I've studied a lot. Marta wants only to speak of Baldwin, but I make her tell me some things in English so that I may learn." She ducked her head a bit, smirking slightly. "I don't understand everything. But I must admit that the language is much easier than I initially thought."

"Do you think you'll return to Austria?" Ewan asked.

Laura gave him a strange shrug. Her eyes looked clouded. "Perhaps Marta told you. Weeks ago, I was involved with a man from the village. I thought perhaps I had fallen in love with him, as ridiculous as that sounds."

“It doesn’t sound ridiculous,” Ewan whispered.

“But I soon found that he’d taken another woman,” Laura continued. She bit hard on her lower lip, then pressed forward. “At the time, I thought perhaps I would return to Austria immediately. That very day, Tatiana invited me to her estate, and she broke into tears. She told me she could never love her husband again. I don’t suppose she thought I could understand her, fully, and in truth, I think I only caught perhaps half. But Ewan, there is such heartache in love. I know it falls over all of us. There’s no escape. One must just continue to try.”

Ewan felt as though she’d taken all the words from the back of his skull regarding Penelope and pressed them into the world. He tilted his head, mesmerised with her. How was it possible she could use his first language to verbalise all the deeply-held emotions in his heart?

“Regardless, I suppose, we’re all in prisons of our own creation,” Ewan said. “My love has just ended before it could even begin.”

“You understand it,” Laura affirmed.

“I do,” Ewan said.

**

Ewan hadn’t envisioned this for the back-end of the summer. When he’d first spotted Laura approaching beside his cousin Marta, his heart had been bound up with lust for Baldwin and had had little room for anything else, even good views. Now, Ewan felt continually

mesmerised with Laura: the way she played so wildly with his nephews, the way she spoke with more and more articulation at the dinner table, the sisterly way she spoke with Marta in German. She laughed in just the way Ewan liked: with her entire body, her face tense and strange. This was the only way to emit true joy.

Ewan and Laura consummated their love at the end of July. They did it in his bedroom with the windows flung wide open and the moonlight drenching the sheets. Everyone else in the grand house was a slumber, which left them to remain awake all night exploring one another's bodies. Ewan could hardly believe how splendid Laura's body was. Her breasts were perky, the nipples dark pink; her belly was flat and powerful, and her legs were strong, perhaps due to years of mountain-climbing. Ewan thought, at that moment, that he might take them both away, leap on a horse, and rush into the wild expanse of the rest of the world.

When the first sunlight swept through the curtains, Laura abandoned him and retreated to her servants' bedroom. Ewan's head felt heavy, but his heart floated and fluttered, a butterfly up to other thoughts. Throughout the day, Marta commented several times on his renewed sense of lightness.

"Have you and Penelope renewed your love?" she asked finally, midway through the day.

Ewan shook his head. "Perhaps I'm only so free because Penelope and I have decided never to see one another again. I had to uphold almost three-quarters of the conversation. I've told you this."

Marta had grown strange and docile in the previous weeks. Ewan supposed this was because Baldwin still hadn't made any sort of move, and Lord Remington had continued to cast himself as one of the dinner regulars. Marta hadn't stormed out of dinner since that time at the end of June, but she seemed jumpy, on the verge of it every time.

Perhaps she'd sensed that discussing Baldwin like this wasn't one of Ewan's preferred topics of conversation, and she'd avoided the topic for several weeks. Still, she seemed burdened.

For this and many other reasons, Ewan chose not to tell her about his affair with Laura—one that he had every intention of upholding. He'd never felt this way before.

But he imagined the truth of it reaching his mother's ears. *My son sleeps with a servant? A servant with hardly a lick of the English language? My son—my only son! What a tragedy!*

Yet again, in the wake of his love for Baldwin, he'd walked directly into another sort of storm.

Two weeks into August, Ewan marched into his bedroom to discover Laura at the edge of his bed, her cheeks stained with tears. Immediately, he closed the door, fearful that someone had spotted them so close together, so alone. The fear across her face forced him away from anger. Instead, it petrified him. He dropped to his knees and wrapped his hands across hers and whispered, "Darling Laura. What is the matter?"

Laura sniffed and stabbed a handkerchief across her nose. "I've discovered something horrible."

Ewan furrowed his brow. Was she dying?

"I'm pregnant," she whispered. "It's yours. It can only be yours."

Ewan exhaled slowly. Throughout their affair, he'd tried to take the utmost precaution, yet of course, occasionally, his passion led to what could have been deemed "not so safe" orchestrations, to feel closer, dig deeper.

"I don't know what to say," he murmured.

Laura muttered something in German. Several more tears escaped her eyes and dripped towards her lips. Ewan brought himself upward, kissed her tenderly, and held her like that for a long time. She shook against him, casting out several hiccups. He assured her he would figure out what to do, that she wouldn't be alone in this.

Of course, when they parted ways, Ewan's head fell to furious panic. He was the son of Margaret Thompson, not the sort of man meant to get a servant pregnant and bring dishonour over the Thompson Estate.

He tried to imagine describing the situation to his mother. All the colour would surely have drained from her face; she might have fainted. She assuredly would have sent Laura away, back to Austria to have the baby "in secret." Perhaps she would have forbidden Ewan from seeing her again—something that might have destroyed him.

Against every bone in Ewan's body, that evening he'd agreed to attend another party with Marta and Baldwin. Throughout these affairs, Ewan was a necessity, as he danced with Marta and ensured she was allowed a few moments of peace from Lord Remington. Still, gossip burned brightly across the county, with the seeming assurance that Lord Remington and Marta would be engaged by the end of the season. Already, people felt as though it had taken far too long. When he could, Ewan did his best to qualm these reckless gossip-fires. Of

course, people would think however they pleased.

Now, he found himself at the centre of such potential gossip.

Of course, he had no clear way forward.

Slowly, he dressed for the ball. There was a hammering knock on the door, the preface for Marta's appearance. She wore yet another of her vibrant gowns; it really seemed as though she had more gowns than days in the year. She turned and splayed the back strings of the gown toward hims and asked, "Could you possibly help me tug this all together, Ewan? Laura has fallen ill and needs to lie down. She told me that she was apt to vomit across my gown. She actually used that word … vomit! I dare say she'll become far more of an Englishwoman than I ever will be. I'm proud of her."

Ewan did as asked. Throughout, he felt as though his heart burst in his throat. When she turned round to beam and thank him, Marta's eyebrows immediately shot low. "There's something wrong, isn't there, Ewan?" she asked. "I can see it reflected in your eyes. Something is off."

Ewan buzzed his lips. "You're always attempting to read me, dear cousin. I request you to turn your sights inward. Focus a bit on your own peculiar and significant ailments."

"As though that sort of inward turn would push Baldwin to do what needs to be done," Marta returned.

"Give him a bit more time. It's a tricky situation," Ewan returned.

“But it’s not as though your mother will allow it. She seems continually on the verge of plotting my unfortunate wedding day.”

“She’s already discussed the floral arrangements with Tatiana,” Ewan said with a dry smile.

Marta snapped her foot against the hardwood floor and cast her eyes back towards the hallway. “How dreadful it all is. Perhaps I’ve caused enough damage here. Perhaps I’d better return to Austria.”

“Perhaps we all should go,” Ewan blurted, conscious of his own failures.

Down in the carriage, Ewan’s thoughts stirred in wild circles. Marta spoke seemingly endlessly as she and Ewan had grown incredibly close, and she found him the only person willing and able to carry her burden. Now, with his own cross to bear, he wasn’t an apt listener. Marta didn’t seem privy to this idea and continued, her lips spitting with rage.

Once at the ball, Ewan watched the night begin as it always did. He felt as though he watched the act of a play, the script already written and the movements rehearsed. When Marta seemed overwhelmed with the Duke, Ewan stepped in to dance with her; they bantered as they tapped their feet beneath them. The banter was standard, funny, nothing really that Ewan could have recalled later on. Then, the Duke stepped back in, demanded a dance—Marta fluttered a laugh and agreed, knowing that it was generally required of her to perform such duties. And on and on the evening went. All the while, Baldwin’s eyes seemed to follow all of them. They were like black holes.

Penelope Sussell was in attendance, a fact that hardly bothered Ewan at all. She seemed to regret the fact that this didn't bother him. She shot towards him, gripped his elbow, and said, "Ewan, darling, I do hope that I haven't injured you too greatly. You know that I respect you a great deal, that I want you in my life in some capacity. I just couldn't find…"

At that moment, another man, broader, taller than Ewan himself, appeared beside Penelope. It was rather clear what had happened; again, Ewan admired the fact that his heart did not leapwith resentment.

"My name is Ewan Thompson," he said to the man, his hand extended. "A pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine!" the man returned. His voice was several octaves deeper than Ewan's; it seemed; almost gutteral. "My name is Max Brash."

"Max Brash. Now, what do you know, Penny? This man has fewer syllables to his entire name than you do in your first. Is that where the attraction comes from? A balance of your names?"

Penelope's cheeks burned red. "Ewan, I don't imagine that this is easy for you…"

"Actually, Penelope, I must tell you … I've thought of you little since you sent that remarkably daft letter. I wish you and BaxMrash all the happiness in the world." He flashed them a smile and turned on his heel, grateful to leap out from the direct and powerful gaze of

Penelope.

It had never been perfect. It had never been what he wanted.

But what was this affair with Laura, then? It was certainly not perfect. He felt the baby, just a smudge in the bottom of her belly, as this enormous weight, latching him to some sort of future he couldn't comprehend. He hurried directly towards the drink table and knocked back not one, but three glasses of wine in a span of only a few minutes. He squeezed his eyes closed and huffed. This: this was how he would live through the evening. He would drink himself nearly to death, then collapse back at home. Memory of it all would catch up to him tomorrow morning, but at the moment, tomorrow morning was someone else's problem.

He grabbed another drink and beelined for Baldwin, who stood off to the side, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"It doesn't do you good to stare at your beautiful love all night," Ewan said. His words sloshed together, an indication of his newfound drunkenness.

"I want to make sure he doesn't take her anywhere," Baldwin returned, his eyes stormy. "I know he's the sort to whip women into dark corners and have his way with them."

"Marta will never allow it," Ewan returned. "And she's nearly as tall as I am. Imagine anyone trying to force Marta to do anything against her will. She'd destroy them. She's only a few days from destroying you, as you still haven't done anything about your affair."

Baldwin's face flushed. "It's not an affair. It's something much deeper with its own variety of problems."

Ewan wanted to chortle, to choke on the lacklustre nature of Marta and Baldwin's problems. Instead, he turned back towards the drink table and asked, "I'm going for another. Would you like one?"

Baldwin seemed too lost in his own thoughts to even regard this question as answerable. He muttered to himself, his eyes still directed towards the man across the ballroom, the man who whispered into the ear of his love.

"I suppose not," Ewan said. He shot towards the table, grabbed yet another glass, and dropped his head back. He felt like a lake, collecting the rain. He wanted to feel nothing at all.

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The hours dripped past. Ewan supposed they always did at events like these. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had an actually decent time, beyond the time several weeks ago when he'd thought that, perhaps, in some reality, he and Penelope could have been happy together. That reality being this one had proved itself untrue. However, the euphoria of the possibility had pleased him.

Now, there was no possibility. There was only the baby. There was only his love for Laura, the servant from Austria whose vocabulary in the English world was still rather seriously lacking. Pregnancy was a word she'd had to look up. Baby, apparently, was the same everywhere.

How was it possible that Ewan still remained upright? He'd drank far more wine than he'd ever before, and his legs felt like jelly beneath him, ready to squash to the ground. He gripped someone's hand—was it Marta's?—and danced, giddy, laughing, although he wasn't sure what on earth he laughed at.

"We should get you home," Marta called to him over the strange chaos that seemed now to live inside his ears. "I'll just be a moment. I want to speak to Baldwin a final time."

With Marta gone, Ewan staggered to the side of the ballroom and splayed himself against the cool wall, his hands on either side to support him. He breathed deeply, enjoying the feeling of the air in his lungs. When he opened his eyes, he found Lord Remington standing before him, clucking his tongue with distaste.

"What have we here?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean," Ewan returned.

"I believe you do," Lord Remington said. "You're the drunkest I've ever seen you. You're perhaps the drunkest person in this very room. What on earth has got into you? I want to be clear that it's not as though I care about your health; it's only that I imagine there's a rather good story to all of it. Give it to me. I'm so terribly bored, now that young Marta has run off to flirt with the man I'll never allow her to marry."

Ewan snorted. "I have to hand it to you, Lord Remington. You're a man of many words."

“A man of many words? Does this even make sense as a concept?” Lord Remington returned. “Regardless, please. Tell me. I know nothing beyond my own boredom and ache for Marta to become my fiancé and wife.”

Ewan bit down hard on his lower lip, so hard that tart blood oozed out and onto his tongue. Lord Remington scrunched his nose and muttered, “You’re such an animal, Ewan.”

“If you must know, I really am,” Ewan affirmed. He shot his finger across his nose and inhaled sharply. How had he been so stupid? Had he ruined his entire life? Had he ruined hers, too?

“And what, pray tell, has informed you of this fact?” Lord Remington demanded.

“Lewis. May I again call you Lewis?”

“I’ll allow it,” Lewis returned.

“I’ve done something wretched. Something I need to take back if I’m to save our family name,” Ewan returned.

Lord Remington kept his face stoic. Was it possible that he had no interest in ruining them at all—that he wished only to uphold Marta’s life, her family, his love for her?

“If you must know, I’ve fallen in love. Head over heels in love. The sort of love that very well should last forever, if only I don’t muck it up by being the absolute imbecile that I normally am.”

“Ah! I’ve heard of your runarounds with Miss Penelope,” the Duke returned.

“Penelope? No. My, how much easier that would be! My mother adores her, thinks she comes from a splendid family. No. If only.”

“Then tell me, Ewan. Just between us girls,” Lord Remington returned, in a sing-song voice. “Is it perhaps a member of our masculine sex?”

“No!” Ewan blurted. Was it possible that this rumour had extended outside the bounds of his private love for Baldwin? “No. If you must know, I’ve fallen in love with Marta’s handmaid from Austria. The kind of love that very well should last me the rest of my life, with more to go around. The sort of love you search for all the days of your existence. But Lewis … and I can’t believe I’m telling you this … what on earth will my mother say? She won’t allow anything like this to occur.”

“A bit of an affair with a handmaid is nothing,” Lord Remington returned. “I’ve had the same sort of thing countless times. Love, perhaps not … but I know you’re a romantic, Ewan. The sort of man who fights for what he wants beyond anything. That said, it’s essential that you leave this particular want behind.”

Ewan’s eyebrows shot high over his forehead, apt to fly off his face and towards the painted ballroom ceiling. “It gets much worse. Much,

much worse." His free hand, the one without the wine glass, smacked across his own face. Goodness, he would have been embarrassed had Laura been in his presence.

"And how on earth could it get much worse?" Lord Remington returned.

"She's…" The word welled up in his mind and spilled over into the concept of tears. "She's with child."

Lord Remington's face didn't twitch at all. It was as though he'd expected something like this to happen to the likes of Ewan.

"You're so quiet with my news," Ewan said.

"It's nothing I haven't heard before amongst my own friends," Lord Remington said. "All those wild parties we throw. All those years of experimentation. It's not as though a few careless pregnancies haven't occurred throughout."

"And what have your friends done as a result?" Ewan demanded. Here he was, before the only man in the world who wouldn't have been shocked at such a thought.

"Well, naturally, they know not to reveal the situation to the rest of society," Lord Remington said. He tapped the side of his nose, as though he reprimanded Ewan for even telling him. "But beyond that, they all handled it a bit differently. Not a single one of them lost their stance in society. That is something we're always quite careful about."

“I cannot lose my standing in society,” Ewan blurted. “But I don’t wish to expose my love to censure, either.”

“What a terrible puzzle you’ve crafted for yourself,” Lord Remington said, clucking his tongue. “It’s almost as though your initial lust should have remained. I know if it had, you wouldn’t be so terribly keen to keep myself and Marta apart.”

Yet again, he brought Baldwin to the forefront. Ewan grew desperate, enraged at the thought that he was surrounded with such banal and selfish creatures. He nodded his head as his heart sunk into the very pit of his lower belly. “I suppose I’m quite too drunk to remain here for the night,” Ewan said, grateful that he could still articulate so much. “I cannot say it’s been a pleasure, Lord Remington, but it has been illuminating. That’s for sure.”

Lord Remington lifted his palm to Ewan’s cheek and gave him three light pats. He then turned towards his dear friend the Regent and began an entirely different conversation, one that had nothing to do with propriety or one’s place in society.

Ewan staggered towards Marta, suddenly fearful. Already, several steps in, he hadn’t any real memory of his conversation with Lord Remington. When he reached Marta, Marta asked him, “What on earth were you discussing with Lewis Remington?”

But to this, Ewan had had nothing to do but shrug and say, “I cannot remember.”

Back in the carriage, Marta gripped his hand and spoke lovingly about

Baldwin, about the small moments they'd been able to capture throughout the ball—how he'd kissed her behind the ear in the garden, only a few feet from the closest people. Ewan mumbled, "How sweet," a few times, but generally had little to no care at all for Marta's predicament. What seemed like only a few moments later, he collapsed in his bed, fully-clothed, knowing only one thing: he was going to be a father, and he had no idea what would come next.

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Ewan slept in quite late. When he awoke, he heard Malcolm and Walter's wails outside in the garden. He peered out through his window to find Laura amongst them, moving a bit slower than usual. Tatiana peered out from the side of the garden, her hands on her hips and her face sour. He wondered if she'd had to end things with her lover.

Downstairs, there was a scuttle of activity. Ewan furrowed his brow. Immediately, pangs of hangover pain shot through him. He placed both hands on either side of his ears and turned towards the door. He felt them coming: the footsteps. They seemed to ring through the entire house. A force of nature approached.

Suddenly, there it was: the knock on the door. Ewan wanted to fall on the floor to play dead. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, with as much clarity as he could, "Who is it?" Even in his own ears, his voice sounded strange and foreign and cloudy. He had never been so hungover in his life.

Lord Remington appeared in the crack of the doorway. Ewan marvelled at the fact that this didn't seem to be such a shock. As Ewan remained in the same clothes he'd worn last night, he considered himself very nearly properly dressed. He shuffled his hands over his wild hair and said, "Lord Remington. What a fine surprise this is!"

Lord Remington looked conspiratorial. He swept through the door and clipped it closed behind himself, giving Ewan a malevolent grin. Ewan's heart sank. Something was amiss—although he couldn't fully articulate the how or why.

"Ewan, my boy. You look remarkable. Really, you do."

Ewan arched his brow. "Whatever do you mean, My Lord?"

He'd never felt so out of touch with his own mind. Sweat billowed up on the back of his neck. He did not, in fact, look remarkable. Why, then, did the Duke wish to announce that he did?

"I imagine I look as though I slept in the clothes I collapsed in," Ewan returned. "Nothing more than that. A bit of a ragamuffin, in fact."

"Oh, my boy, that's nothing when compared to the truth of your existence! You're going to be a father. A father! The very thought alone might force me to the ground for good."

Ewan's heart sank. Was it possible that in his reckless drinking over the previous night, he'd someone blurted the innermost secret of his heart? How was it possible that he could have delivered himself like that, his soul on a platter, to one of the men he hated the most in the world?

"Ah! And here it is. The look I came all the way to the wretched

Thompson Estate to see," Lord Remington continued. "I couldn't wait to see you comprehend the weight of what you've done! Yes, my Ewan … you've given me everything of yourself. The very thing that could ruin you. And you know what I'll do with this, don't you? What is the one thing on this planet, I want more than anything?"

Ewan's jaw dropped. There was nothing he could say.

"Please, Ewan. Just guess for me. Guess what I might do with this," Lord Remington said. He sounded dramatic, giddy. He took a huge step forward and beamed down at Ewan, being a few inches taller than the other man. "I'm going to use it to destroy you--unless, of course, you help me break up Marta and Baldwin. I need your help to unite us, once and for all. Otherwise, you and the handmaid? Your information will be told in every parlour, every ballroom, every alleyway from here to London. You will know nothing but heartache and pain, the kind that comes from pure and unadulterated embarrassment."

Lord Remington turned towards the door and sauntered away. Just before he disappeared, he spun back and blinked at Ewan, his grin still smeared across his face. "I never could have envisioned a better way for all of this to end," he said. "But I suppose I shouldn't think of it as an ending. It's the start of something beautiful between Marta and me--and it's the start of something hidden and secret and monstrous in the form of a child for you. We're both facing the rest of our lives. Almost exciting if you look at it that way."

The moment Lord Remington disappeared, Ewan collapsed on the bed and pressed his pillow against his mouth. He let out a violent, wild scream, one that rattled his body around. Then, he was quiet.

He'd destroyed himself. And now, he had to decide what to do next.

Ultimately, he had to be just as selfish as Baldwin and Marta.

He had to choose himself and his baby and Laura over everything. He couldn’t drag them through the dirt.

Baldwin and Marta had to fend for themselves, now.

Chapter 32

It was early August. Marta had been away from Austria throughout the entire summer, so long that her memories of Austria flickered in and out of her mind, becoming increasingly inarticulate and foggy. When would she see her mountains again? When would she speak to someone besides Laura in German? When would she understand the world and all its faults and beauty in just the same way?

Over the previous few days, Marta had noticed a strange shift within Laura. She seemed morose and pouty, apt to several days spent in bed in a row. This wasn't like the Laura Marta had known for years. Even Malcolm and Walter seemed at a loss. When they whispered to one another in German at the dinner table, without Laura present, Marta heard them say, "I don't know what's got into her. She seems so terribly sad. Should we do something for her? Do you think we should get her new chocolate?"

Their clear love for her made Marta's heart ache. Still, she wondered if it was high time that Laura returned to Austria.

One afternoon, Marta asked her this very question: if she wished to return. At that moment, all the colour, of which there wasn't much, drained from Laura's face. She smacked both palms to her cheeks and whispered, "Have I done something wrong, Marta? I wish nothing of the sort. Please, don't make me do it. I want to remain here. I want to be an Englishwoman. Oh, I curse my status every day as a handmaiden. How can I rise above it all?"

This puzzled Marta. Laura had never been one for such fits, and she'd never shown herself to be anything but grateful for her position as

handmaiden. She pressed her hand against her stomach and let out a low sigh.

“Have things progressed with the man in the village?” Marta asked.

Laura snarled, “That ended what seems like years ago. I know you to be too entirely entranced with your own gossip, your own world of pain, but the vegetable man dumped me so completely that I was void of promise or hope. Until I found a new man, a man who comprehends the weight of my existence and answers in kind…”

“He sounds remarkable, Laura,” Marta said. She made her voice sound urgent, vibrant. “Please, tell me more about him! Where did you meet?”

It was a funny thing, in Marta’s mind, that Laura had this separate romantic life. As much as Marta cared for her and considered her a friend, she was, after all, only a handmaid on an English adventure.

“It doesn’t matter. I know things between us can never be the way I wish them to be,” Laura responded, worrying her lip. “He is from a far different world than I. Some moments, I perceive him to care, truly care, truly see, but then others, he seems monstrous and volatile, ready to blame me for all of it.”

Marta arched her brow. “I dare say you won’t give me any specifics, will you?”

Laura shook her head violently. Marta wasn’t prepared to spend the rest of her afternoon beating around the bush. Thus, she made an

excuse and patted down the hallway towards the garden. To her surprise, Baldwin awaited her in the garden, both her horse and his already in their saddles and reins. The sight of him made her heart jump. He looked especially handsome on this day, as well: his eyes darker, his smile secretive, caught somewhere behind his lips.

“What on earth are you doing here?” she asked, breathless. Already, her lips felt hungry to kiss his.

“I couldn’t stay away for long,” Baldwin said with a laugh. “I packed us a bit of a picnic. I hope you’re hungry.”

“You know that I’m the sort of woman who can always eat,” Marta said.

Baldwin assisted her into her saddle. She splayed her feet to one side, the skirts arranged beautifully. Baldwin’s eyes skated across her shoulders, her breasts. She could see him through his eyes: her youth, her vitality, the wind lifting her yellow curls gently and tossing them.

“You look like a painting,” he told her.

They rode their familiar route: across the moors, skating along the edge of the forest line until a clearing burst forth just beside a creek. Baldwin slowed his horse and pulled it around. His grin broadened.

“Are you ready for that picnic?” he asked her.

The thing Marta liked especially about this, their sacred space in the woods, was the fact that the nearest person was several miles away. She slipped off her saddle and blinked out, her eyes scanning as far as the eye could see. Only far-away mansions, wide open-fields, enormous trees that seemed in competition to reach the sky. In her haze, Baldwin reached her and pressed his hand at her lower back. She lifted her chin and gazed into his eyes. He kissed her softly, gently.

“I missed you,” she whispered.

“It’s only been a day, Marta,” Baldwin affirmed.

“I know. But I require a sort of non-stop affair,” Marta returned.

They kissed again, this time more deeply. Then, Baldwin set about presenting the picnic. He splayed a blanket across the ground and placed a basket towards the corner. As he prepared, Marta spoke, giggling.

“Laura’s confessed that she’s fallen in love again,” she said.

“The man from the village?” Baldwin asked.

“Actually, no!” Marta said. “Apparently, she’s found someone else. Someone of a higher station. She seems quite frustrated by it all. I have a horrible sense that he’s treating her badly because an affair with her might alter his status…”

“What a dreadful thing,” Baldwin said.

“I had assumed she would want to return to Austria by now,” Marta said. “But she seems adamant that she wishes to become an Englishwoman.”

“I hope you never become so English. It’s what I like the most about you,” Baldwin said. He stepped closer to her, gripped both of her hands. He held one of them against his heart.

Through her entire body, she could feel the quake of his sturdy heart. At that moment, she prayed for it, for all of them, for them to remain together. To be one.

“I know you want this just as badly as I do,” Baldwin whispered. “I know you want to marry me.”

Marta’s eyes grew wide. “I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

“Then why don’t we do it?” Baldwin said.

“Yes. Why not?” Marta said. Her heart beat rapidly, like a rabbit’s. “Why don’t we just do exactly what we wish? We shouldn’t wait for Aunt Margaret to come to her senses. Every new day that passes is a fresh one. Who’s to say that we shouldn’t make up our own rules?”

“But ask me properly,” Marta said. She reached up and twirled a blonde curl. “Please.”

“But you’ve already agreed,” Baldwin said playfully.

“It doesn’t feel real. Not unless you say it properly.”

Baldwin grinned broadly. He dropped to one knee, gripped her hands and whispered, “Marta Schnitzler. Will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?”

Slowly, Marta nodded. “I will marry you. I will marry you and tell you how I love you every day of my life. I will honour this decision forever.”

Baldwin leapt up and kissed her. He lifted her into his arms and twirled her around and around until she squealed with pleasure. Slowly, he dropped her back to the ground, toes-first. Her eyes remained closed as he kissed her again, with seemingly endless longing. She felt his passion in the very deep root of her stomach.

They were again a great distance from anyone else. Baldwin’s hands gripped her waist hard, then quickly began to tear at the buttons of her dress, until it spilled down around her, like trees giving off their leaves. She stood in only her corset, her breasts bulging out into his hands. Slowly, he kissed her again and gently laid her back, so that she splayed across the picnic blanket, her hair spilled out around her in a perfect halo.

Their kisses felt powerful, the kind that pushed them out of this world

and into the next. Marta couldn't keep track of her hands. They toyed with the buttons on his shirt and then flung the fabric off his shoulders to reveal his broad shoulders, the perfect muscles that stitched themselves towards his back. Her eyes felt hungry, eating everything they could see. Within moments, she tore his pants off, as well, and his member bulged across the flat of her hand. A small drop of cum frosted at the very tip. She lifted her face, her eyes directed towards him, and drew a line across that dot, tasting him. Immediately, he shuddered with want. His hands gripped either side of her head as she took him as far as she could in her mouth, until the end of him thrust up against the back of her throat. Her love for him was so immense, so all-extending, that she had no desire to do anything but feel every inch of him in as many ways as she could.

Baldwin pressed his hands on either side of her inner thighs. He spread them wide and then brought a hand against the juncture between, which felt wet, seething with desire. The moment he touched her, her heart leapt into her throat, and a moan escaped her lips. She yearned for him to plunge into her, to take herthere beneath the vibrant blue sky.

How was it possible that she should receive everything she'd ever wanted?

Baldwin lifted her petticoat skirts, bunched them around her stomach, and gazed at the darkness within, the peach-like centre, soft and wet. After a pause, he plunged forward and drew his tongue across her womanhood, the portion of herself that allowed them to become whole. With his tongue against her, she felt herself unfoldlike a caterpillar exploding out from its cocoon and revealing itself to be a butterfly. Had it been a butterfly all along?

Marta arched her back, played her fingers through his dark hair, and tugged hard. Just when she thought she might come against his tongue, he moved over her, his broad chest just above her face. His cock found the entry of her, the path to her innermost sense of self

and desires.

They made love for hours, taking brief breaks to eat and drink and laugh. Marta lost all sense of the time, but when she opened her eyes to acknowledge the sun, she found it much further down in the sky than it had been. It was very nearly dinner time; this was something she felt in her soul. She lifted her back from the ground and looked down at Baldwin, completely naked and strung up beside her. She loved his legs. They were long and thin, perhaps too thin, but uniquely his—the sort of legs that made the rest of him look a tiny bit silly, as it showed a small bit of imperfection. She loved his imperfections. She loved it all.

"If you didn't ask me to marry you already, I would want you to ask me now," Marta murmured, turning her cheek against his chest and beaming up at him.

"I suppose you'll make me say it again and again," Baldwin said, laughing.

"I just love hearing it," Marta whispered. "But of course, it matters not. Not now. Now, we have far different problems ahead."

Baldwin arched his brow. "Whatever do you mean?"

"It's time for us to announce our engagement to the likes of Aunt Margaret," Marta said, delivering a sneaky smile.

"Oh yes. That."

Together, they packed up the picnic and then drew themselves back on their horses. Marta cast almost constant glances towards Baldwin, reminding the inner panic of her mind that all was well, that she'd agreed to marry him, and there was nothing else that anybody could do to stop her. It had gone on long enough. After all the pain and torment she'd gone through in Austria, she wasn't prepared to throw anything like this away. Not for anything.

When the mansion emerged on the horizon line, of course, Marta's heart started its reckless beating. She swallowed and cast her eyes again towards Baldwin, who seemed similarly panicked. Was it possible that either of them had misjudged this situation? Was it possible that this announcement would alter the opinion of Aunt Margaret forever and potentially put them on some sort of dreadful, destructive path?

They returned the saddles just as Lord Remington appeared on horseback. He looked regal and surly, his smile powerfully angry and self-serving, as though a smile could possibly translate so much. Marta blinked at him three times without saying a single word. Shock was the only word that existed in her gut.

This was meant to be one of the happiest days of her life. This was meant to be a day that allowed her to be free in the love she'd decided upon. Instead, it seemed, Lord Remington would be a fixture in the memories of the day.

"Good evening, Marta! Goodness, you're quiet, aren't you? I imagined you'd be pleased to see me." He took a large step towards her, his lips grazing her ear. "I simply couldn't wait until the next party to hold you in my arms." His eyes then flashed up towards Baldwin, who stood, seething.

“Where have the two of you been?” Lord Remington said. His voice was playful, dancing above them like some sort of evil fairy.

“Our for a ride,” Baldwin returned.

“How terribly quaint,” Lord Remington said. “Marta, you really must allow me the same sort of time soon. I would love to stretch my horse’s legs across the moors and be allowed to turn my head to see your beautiful face. I can’t envision a better afternoon. You’re undeserving of such a beauty, Baldwin, but I suppose I must let it pass.”

Baldwin’s hands clenched into fists. He looked ready to smash Lord Remington’s skull against the side of the stable door. That moment, however, Uncle Everett sauntered out of the back of the stables, looking cheerful, his cheeks pink from a fast ride.

“There you are!” he said to all of them. “I imagine my Margaret is in a tiff, worried we won’t make it back in time for dinner. Shall we?”

Together, the three 20-somethings marched behind Uncle Everett. Marta and Baldwin both looked as though they’d seen an actual ghost, while Lord Remington walked jauntily, clearly pleased with himself. How on earth he’d managed to finagle a dinner invitation on this, one of the most important days of Marta’s life, was beyond her.

When they appeared in the foyer, Uncle Everett blared a greeting across the expanse of the mansion. His voice seemed to shake the very foundation of the place. That moment, Ewan shot out from the parlour, his eyes shadowed. He took a look at Lord Remington and muttered, “No,” to himself, a sound Marta assumed only she could

hear.

Why did Ewan not wish to see Lord Remington? Was it because he'd known that Baldwin was on the verge of his proposal? Perhaps Ewan hadn't been told about the dinner reservation and thus didn't know enough to tell Baldwin of the fact?

Aunt Margaret popped out of the kitchen. Marta knew by now that she enjoyed hunkering over the shoulder of the cook and demanding maximum flavour. The cook seemed to mind incredibly, even going so far as to shove her elbow into Margaret's stomach several times. Each time, Margaret informed everyone that it was only a mistake, and worth the pain, as the dinner had turned out splendidly.

But this was Aunt Margaret's way, wasn't it? She had to have her hand in everyone's business.

"Good evening, Lord Remington!" Aunt Margaret cried. She approached, her breasts bouncing and her arms extended. "It's remarkable that you asked to come at the last minute. We're having the very best lamb cutlets that our money could possibly buy. It would have been a waste not to enjoy them with someone like you."

Baldwin shot Marta a dangerous look. Marta shrugged, unsure of what to say. They watched as Lord Remington performed all the maneuvers he was meant to, as the potential-husband of Aunt Margaret's niece, including complimenting Margaret's appearance and mentioning just how delightful the dinner smelled.

They sat. Lord Remington perched across from Marta at the dinner table, while Ewan and Baldwin sat across from one another. Laura perched on her own chair, her eyes on her still-empty plate. Aunt

Margaret and Uncle Everett sat on either side of the heads of the table. That moment, another door popped open, followed by the squeals of familiar little boys.

“Goodness. We’re quite the zoo these days, aren’t we, Ewan?” Aunt Margaret said.

Ewan’s cheeks burned red. Marta felt he’d been acting strangely, hardly looking into her eyes. Had they lost whatever friendship they’d built?

“Slow down, please!” Tatiana cried, as Walter and Malcolm hopped down the hall to join them. They rushed into chairs on opposite sides of the table, then grabbed the forks and knives and pounded them on the tabletop. When Tatiana appeared in the doorway, her eyes sombre and fatigued, she said, “What did I tell you about table manners?”

The boys took no notice. Instead, they seemed to bang louder.

“Silence!” Aunt Margaret barked. “I don’t imagine that my grandsons were raised in barns. Right now, it seems as though this is their first time at the dinner table, and should be treated as such. Would either of you like to sit on the floor at our feet and be handed scraps throughout the meal?”

Walter and Malcolm exchanged glances, then placed their silverware back on the tabletop. Uncle Everett cleared his throat and said, “Thank you, boys.” Tatiana collapsed in the chair beside Marta and arched her brow.

“Laura, I really can’t manage them without you. They asked if they might be allowed to stay on here with you.”

Laura’s eyes told Marta that she comprehended every single word. However, she pretended that she hadn’t. Why? She furrowed her brow and turned her eyes toward Malcolm and Walter. She spoke to them in German and said, “You both had better behave. Your mother wants to eat my head.”

At this, they smirked and quivered with laughter, but they didn’t budge beyond that.

The dinner was served to a quiet audience. Lamb cutlets were placed on every plate, along with broccoli and freshly-baked rolls. Marta’s throat felt terribly tight. She wondered if she’d be able to speak ever again. Her eyes turned from Baldwin to Lord Remington and back again. She’d only just informed Baldwin that she would marry him. Now, faced with the unfortunate predicament of blaring this news in front of the man who attempted to court her, she felt lacklustre and strange.

Baldwin’s black eyes targeted her across the table. Marta shook her head delicately, a sign that they would push the announcement back to a more appropriate time. But Baldwin, it seemed, had waited too long. He shot up from his chair, making it smash behind him. Everyone blinked at him with wide, panicked eyes.

“Have you remembered something, Baldwin?” Lord Remington said. “You look as though you’re on the verge of some sort of mental collapse.” He tittered with laughter at his own joke.

“In fact, I have remembered something,” Baldwin returned. He drew

his chin higher. His eyes were perpetually stormy, hard.

Suddenly, Ewan also shot up from the table. Laura's eyes broadened with panic. The way she looked at Ewan was incredibly curious, although Marta couldn't fully articulate why. Baldwin arched his brow at Ewan, incredulous at his action.

"Perhaps whatever it is you've remembered can wait until after our guest has taken his leave?" Ewan said suddenly to Baldwin. He placed his hand at the back of his head, as though he wanted to cushion the blow.

But Baldwin had already announced himself. He sputtered and said, "It's entirely unbecoming to halt one's announcement at the very beginning."

"And yet, don't you imagine it's rather unbecoming to announce something that doesn't technically pertain to the matter at hand?" Ewan said. Again, his voice seemed to stagger along, unable to bring ready clarity.

"Oh no, Baldwin. Don't halt on my account," Lord Remington said. He collected his hands beneath his chin and leaned forward, almost goading him.

Marta had the thought that if she hadn't loved Baldwin so desperately, she would have loved to rush out of this situation as quickly as she could, take a coach to yet another country or a boat to a separate continent. She inhaled slowly and again made eye contact with Laura. Laura's eyes shimmered with tears. What on earth was going on?

“I will speak my truth regardless of your allowance of it, Lord Remington,” Baldwin said.

“Baldwin, that really isn’t necessary,” Aunt Margaret said. “Why don’t we all sit down for our meal. I, for one, am quite…”

“There isn’t time for such things,” Baldwin said. “Aunt Margaret, you know that I’ve loved you as something of a mother figure throughout so much of my life. I will never forget all you’ve given me, nor the fact that you look at me with more love than any other member of my family. You’re a generous woman with an enormous heart.

“That said, I’ve had to go outside the bounds of your wishes, Aunt Margaret. I’ve had to follow my own heart, taking a cue from how you lead with your love.”

Aunt Margaret’s words sounded icy. “I don’t suppose I understand what you mean, Baldwin.”

“Aunt Margaret. Everyone.” Baldwin heaved a sigh. “I’ve asked Marta Schnitzler to be my wife, and she’s agreed. We will be married.”

The silence at the table was impenetrable. Marta felt stones form in her stomach. In truth, in all her years of imagining this moment, the moment when her engagement was revealed to her family, she had never imagined it quite like this. She’d imagined screams of joy, enormous hugs, whispered secrets; she’d imagined her father telling her how proud he was of her, how thrilled he was to welcome her beau into the family.

“I see,” Aunt Margaret finally whispered.

Ewan and Baldwin both remained standing. Marta was suddenly conscious that Ewan’s eyes had fallen to Lord Remington, seemingly waiting for him to speak. Baldwin, to his credit, seemed entirely pleased to only look at Marta in these moments. Regardless of the others’ approval, or lack of it, he seemed to wish only to view her, to feel her heart glowing back to him.

“Aunt Margaret, it really will make me happy to marry Baldwin,” Marta suddenly interjected, trying to penetrate the darkness that ached between all of them.

But before she could finish the sentiment, Lord Remington started to laugh. The laugh rang out, grew volatile, and almost violent. Ewan dropped back onto his chair and hugged his head in his hands. Massive tears rushed down Laura’s cheeks. Marta gaped at him, at all of them, genuinely confused.

Finally, she cried, “Why won’t you explain yourself, Lord Remington? Or will you leave the rest of us in darkness?”

Lord Remington placed his hands over his eyes and let out a last laugh. “Oh, darling Marta. Beautiful Marta. The belle of the ball.”

Marta’s throat constricted. “Don’t act so crazy. You’re a guest in this house, regardless of your title, and…”

“Marta! That’s no way to speak to a Duke,” Aunt Margaret cried.

“Don’t worry yourself, Aunt Margaret,” Lord Remington said. “She knows not what she does. One day soon, of course, she will be my wife, and she will know how to pay for her actions today. Mark my words.”

Marta’s heart nearly burst with apprehension. “Haven’t you been listening, Lord Remington? Baldwin and I have only just announced our engagement. We … we will be the happiest people in the county. We’ve begun our relationship with honesty and heart, and we…”

“Oh, but darling. You and Baldwin will never marry,” Lord Remington said.

He sounded so certain, so solid. Marta’s eyes flashed towards Baldwin, whose face was beet-red with anger. His hands drew into fists.

“I know you will take that back this instant,” Baldwin growled. “Or you will rue the day you…”

“Baldwin, don’t injure yourself with your own mysterious passion. We all know you’re better-suited to a life of office work and quiet,” Lord Remington said. “Does anyone at this table disagree with me?”

“I have reason to believe that that is quite incorrect,” Marta blurted.

But nobody else spoke. Nobody else came to Baldwin and Marta’s rescue. Lord Remington clucked his tongue and said, “In fact, I will

see to it that you never marry. In years' time, you will return to this memory and laugh, for how could you be so stupid as to believe that you could have such a childish wish?"

Baldwin hurtled around the side of the table and appeared directly over Lord Remington's head. He steamed with anger. Aunt Margaret cried out, "Baldwin! What's got into you?"

"Haven't you heard him, Aunt Margaret? Or have you decided against any sort of negativity towards this monster of a human, all due to your intense desire for Marta's increased position in a country she hardly understands?" Baldwin blurted.

Lord Remington rose abruptlyfrom his chair. His own hands drew to fists. All the colour drained from Marta's cheeks.

"If you strike me today, Baldwin, you must understand that I will hold nothing back," Lord Remington said. "You will remember this day as the very last decent one of your life. Right now, I've allowed your little charade with Marta to take its due course. But a blow to my physical form? That is beyond any line I could have drawn in the sand."

"Then tell me, Lord Remington," Baldwin said, his voice husky. "Tell me how you think you can stop our marriage? Tell me. What's your grand scheme?"

Ewan cried out, "I think we had better split up for the afternoon. Mother, you're looking terribly ill. Should I take you upstairs?"

“Don’t be foolish, Ewan,” Aunt Margaret barked.

“I’ll tell you,” Lord Remington said eerily. “You know my relationship with the Regent, don’t you?”

“Everyone does. The two of you run thick as thieves. And I’ve little respect for either of you,” Baldwin whispered.

“That’s all well and good,” Lord Remington said. “But you must know that because you’re a first cousin to the Regent, it’s necessary that the Regent approve whoever you wish to marry. I know you don’t necessarily bother yourself with the rules of our society, but this is one you won’t be able to avoid, given your current situation.”

Throughout his speech, he smeared a broader smile across his face. Marta’s heart sunk deeper. She suppressed a sob. She’d never heard this rule, but she assumed now that it was true. When she glanced at Aunt Margaret, she seemed to glow with recognition. This, it seemed, was her last beacon of hope. Perhaps Marta could marry the Duke after all.

“You think you’re so terribly clever with these threats, don’t you?” Baldwin blared.

“I don’t think of this as a threat,” Lord Remington said. “Only a description of the broader picture.”

“You’ve forgotten something, Lord Remington,” Baldwin said. “Something rather important.”

Lord Remington's eyes sparkled. "I imagine I haven't."

"You've forgotten that you aren't the only person with connections in your midst," Baldwin said. "While you've marched your way up the ladder, I've put in good and diligent work with various members of the privy council. Beyond that, you might remember that I'm 25 years old. This means that I'm just a few months away from age 26, at which time I am exempt from the requirement of demanding my dear first-cousin, the Regent's approval."

Baldwin snaked his arms over his chest and returned Lord Remington's massive grin. Marta so yearned to rush into his arms and hug him close and whisper how proud she was of him, but she held herself back, latched to her chair.

Lord Remington's face lost all its colour. He blinked at Baldwin several times and cleared his throat. "I see," he said.

"I dare say you're still a rather new Duke, aren't you? Only just recently granted your nobility and title," Baldwin said, dismissing him as though he were only a child. "This sort of thing won't be taken kindly to in the future, but I imagine that together, myself and the Thompsons and Marta herself will find a way to forgive you."

Lord Remington's features coloured markedly. He looked on the verge of explosion. He turned his eyes towards Aunt Margaret, who now seemed to stare down at her untouched plate, unable to meet him.

"Margaret, I don't suppose you have something to say about this?" Lord Remington barked.

Instead of speaking, Aunt Margaret slowly shook her head no. It was clear that she'd been cornered in her own game.

"All these weeks you've been grooming me for a future with Marta, and now you allow me to die here at your dinner table," Lord Remington blurted. "It's a horrendous act, Margaret. One that I will declare to as many of my constituents as I can."

"What do you think you're doing? Threatening a woman older than yourself?" Baldwin retorted.

"This isn't your business, Baldwin," Lord Remington said through clenched teeth. "Besides. Aunt Margaret, you've told me over and over again I'm the rightful match for Marta. You told me that she had no business with the likes of Baldwin. You told me that you would fight tooth and nail to ensure that Marta would be my wife."

"And I have done that," Aunt Margaret murmured. Her eyes had become sharp like those of birds. She directed her gaze back towards Lord Remington and said, "Baldwin should have come to me for approval prior to making any sort of decision."

"Tell them that you still perceive me to be the better match for Marta," Lord Remington blared. His cheeks were again tomato-red. "Tell them that this Baldwin affair is short-lived."

Aunt Margaret opened her lips and whispered, "I still perceive you to be the better match."

“Aunt Margaret!” Marta cried. “I’ve chosen the one I wish to marry.”

“I know you only to be a woman of incredible promise, Marta. Perhaps your love for Baldwin is a mistake,” Aunt Margaret said, her voice low. “I know many women who have made incredible mistakes in marriage.”

“Are you suggesting that Baldwin himself, a man you’ve known through most of his life, is a mistake?” Marta returned.

“As you’ve just said, I’ve known Baldwin for years, Marta, and I recognise that your personalities are like oil and water. Don’t think of the love you hold for him now, for that will surely change and fade,” Aunt Margaret murmured.

“Don’t you hear her words?” Lord Remington cried. “She speaks eternal truth, Marta.”

“Regardless of her wishes, I will not marry you, Lord Remington,” Marta said. She felt the stony nature of her face, the hatred in her own eyes. “Perhaps I make the biggest mistake of my life with this marriage, but it is a mistake I’m willing to make due to the power I feel for Baldwin in my heart.”

“This is quite rich, isn’t it?” Lord Remington cried. He surged back against the dining room wall and pounded his fist against it, an act that seemed to make the entire house quake. When he turned back, he yelled, “If you do not marry me, Marta Schnitzler, I will see to it that your entire family is ruined.”

Marta arched her brow. Confusedly, she glanced at first Baldwin, then Aunt Margaret, demanding some sort of conclusion. Was this yet another rule about English society that she hadn't learned? Was it possible that Lord Remington could ruin them, all of them, all due to some misunderstanding?

"What on earth are you talking about?" Baldwin shouted. He stepped towards Lord Remington again, his fists high.

"I know only this, Baldwin," Lord Remington said. A peculiar smirk worked its way across his face. "I know only that I have the Regent's ear. Perhaps it is legal for you to go about your business once you reach the age of 26, and I dare say you're telling the truth there. But beyond this, know that I have information outside of your particular bounds. I have this very information that would ruin your family. And you had best understand that I'm more like a weapon than anything else."

"Explain yourself, Lord Remington," Baldwin said. "Stop dangling whatever it is you think you know before us as though we're merely children. We can handle whatever it is. We…"

"But Baldwin, wouldn't that muck up the secret?" Lord Remington said. "I must keep it until the very last moment. It's my treasure. It's the single thing that will unite me again with my dear Marta." He stepped again towards Marta and lifted his fingers so that they fluttered across her cheek.

Marta grabbed his hand and threw it back towards him, so swiftly that he hardly had a chance to react. Lord Remington's face changed. His mouth fell open. His opposite hand gripped the one she'd thrown, as though it was actually injured, and he needed to sustain it.

“A spitfire,” he muttered. “How wonderful.”

He said it as though he was on the verge of murdering her.

Suddenly, Ewan tore up from his chair, an act that made it crash back behind him and shudder across the hardwood. Everyone turned towards him, their eyes enormous.

“Ewan? You’re white as a sheet,” Marta whispered.

Laura, too, stood. Marta marvelled at the incredible way she looked at Ewan: as though she feared for his life. A single tear crested from Laura’s right eye and fell towards her chin.

Was it possible that there was something amiss right before Marta’s eyes?

Was it possible that Ewan and Laura had kept this a secret from her all this time?

Yet—hadn’t Ewan been in love with Baldwin? Hadn’t he been unable to fight through his affection, something that had turned him towards Penelope, and then on to the next woman, whoever might have him?

But Laura wasn’t the sort of creature to just be “taken.” Rather, she looked at him beadily, as though she’d coveted him all this time.

Perhaps Marta only read into this. Perhaps it had nothing to do with reality.

“What is it, Ewan?” Aunt Margaret finally asked, her voice bright and strange.

“I cannot take it anymore,” Ewan blurted.

“I dare say none of us can,” Aunt Margaret returned.

“No. That’s not what I mean,” Ewan said. Sweat bolted down his forehead and cheeks. “The secret that Lord Remington refers to involves me. It involves my life.”

Aunt Margaret pressed her lips together hard, her eyes shimmering with confusion. Lord Remington smacked his fists against his thighs and said, “Ewan, don’t give the game away so quickly! You don’t know a thing about the art of building a scene.”

Ewan’s jaw clenched. He seemed to refuse to look at Lord Remington. Suddenly, Laura raced from her chair and rushed to his side. Her thin arms wrapped around his torso, and her cheek fell across his chest.

“Laura! What on earth has got into you?” Aunt Margaret blared. “Sit back in your chair this instant.”

“Aunt Margaret, I’m sorry, but I cannot!” Laura returned in perfect English.

Marta felt her cheeks burn red. Baldwin stepped towards her and placed his hand behind her back. His black eyes remained centred on Ewan, as though he wanted to ensure the strange man didn’t move from his position.

“Ewan, my boy,” Lord Remington said. His voice seemed honeylike, soft and fluid. “You really should sit down. Think about what you’re about to say. Think about what it could do to your poor mother.”

“But that’s the thing, isn’t it? You’re thinking of what it might do to my poor mother,” Ewan blared. “You’re using it as a weapon against my nearest and dearest family and friends, and I cannot have it. I must be stronger than that.”

“Will someone just say what’s happened?” Aunt Margaret said. Her voice wavered, as though she was on the verge of mental collapse.

“Mother. Father. Tatiana. Everyone,” Ewan said. He lifted his chin. He looked far more regal than any king Marta had seen up close. She supposed this had everything to do with the fact that one had to be respectful and kind and simply bigger than one’s self when one fell in love.

In fact, Marta had recognised this in herself in recent weeks, as she’d grown deeper in love for Baldwin.

“What is it?” Aunt Margaret demanded again. Her eyes were

genuinely lost, as though she gazed into an impossible mist.

Even Laura's arms wrapped around Ewan's stomach hadn't given her a clue.

"That which Lord Remington refers to involves myself, my affair," Ewan continued.

Everyone's eyes swung towards him. Beside him, Laura bit down hard on her lower lip, her blue eyes beaming towards the floor. Marta remembered the day she'd asked Laura to go to England with her; she'd leapt up and down as though this were the biggest opportunity of her life.

She'd never envisioned anything like this.

"Affair?" Aunt Margaret demanded.

"Yes, Mother. I've fallen in love. In love with this beautiful woman, Laura. It's clear to me that she's brought more love and life into my life in the previous weeks than any creature I've met on this earth," Ewan continued. His voice rose and became more violent. "And not only that, she's pregnant. With my child."

Aunt Margaret gasped and whipped her hand across her lips. Marta's heart thudded. Finally, Laura turned her blue eyes to meet Marta's. She gave a funny, lacklustre shrug, then added, "It's true. I'm pregnant."

Immediately, Lord Remington smashed his fist onto the centre of the table. One of the platters fell and crashed across the floor, scattering shards across and into the various corners.

“Don’t you see?” Lord Remington cried. “He’s wronged your family. He’s run off with the maid and got her pregnant. A more dire situation, I could hardly imagine myself. Marta? You must see it. You must see the shame he’s brought onto your family.”

Then, Lord Remington spun towards Baldwin, his eyes expectant. “You’re the man of incredible allegiance to propriety, Baldwin. I know this more than I know anything else. Tell the man that he’s wronged not only the Thompsons and Marta but also yourself, as you have such a close connection to him. Tell him that …”

“That’s enough,” Baldwin said simply. His hand remained pressed at Marta’s back.

Lord Remington sputtered with genuine shock. “Whatever do you mean? Have you not just heard the man’s confession? He’s chosen his lineage through the little German maid. He’s…”

“She’s Austrian,” Marta interjected. Rage throttled through her and made her cheeks burn red.

“Why on earth did you have this information in the first place?” Baldwin demanded. Instead of rage, he seemed flabbergasted, apt to stand there and demand comprehension rather than any sort of continued confession or punishment for Ewan.

Lord Remington sputtered again. Across the table, Ewan drew his arms tighter around Laura, so much so that Marta worried about the baby inside. Goodness--was it possible that Laura would remain in England, that she would be allowed to have Ewan's baby?

But her eyes traced down to find Aunt Margaret's face, completely drained of blood. She lifted a glass of water to her lips, sipped it, then dropped the glass, casting it to the ground. This was an accident, but it added to the shock of the room, the strange and simmering tension.

"You've killed her, Ewan," Lord Remington said. He rubbed his palms together conspiratorially. "You've ruined your mother forever. She won't be able to look at you, not now that you've taken to the maid…"

"Won't you stop calling her a maid?" Aunt Margaret barked then.

Lord Remington's smile waned. It was clear that his initial scheme had lost its way. "Whatever do you mean, Auntie Margaret?"

Slowly, Aunt Margaret gripped the table and shrugged herself up. Her legs quaked beneath her. "Lord Remington, I must ask you to leave this house this moment. You're no longer welcome here."

"Aunt Margaret, we've been through so much together," Lord Remington said. He staggered towards her, reaching for her elbow, but she ripped it away just in time. "Aunt Margaret, you must know how deeply I care for you, for Marta…"

“I know one thing to be true,” Aunt Margaret returned. “You want only to win, Lord Remington. You probably have very little love in your heart for Marta at all.”

A shadow passed over Lord Remington’s face. He stormed back towards the doorway, his eyes scanning past every single face. Finally, he brought a finger out before him and pointed at every person in the room.

“Mark my words, you absolute collection of imbeciles,” he muttered. “I will spread this gossip, regardless. You will be scorned. All of you. I will make sure of it. Unless…”

His eyes found Marta’s once more. Marta’s heart pattered about in her throat. He gave her a nearly-syrupy-sweet smile, then said, “There’s one condition through which you can avoid all this heartache. Marta, I will give you one day to decide. One day. And if you agree to proceed with me, none of this will get out into the open.” He bowed his head, his face a brooding masterpiece.

Seconds later, he was gone.

Chapter 33

Moments after Lord Remington fled, Aunt Margaret collapsed once more at the dining room table. She appeared woozy and nearly fell forward, her nose nearing the mashed potatoes on her plate. Just in the nick of time, Baldwin leapt towards her, gripped her shoulders, and pulled her back. Laura screeched with fear.

"My goodness, Baldwin. Thank you," Aunt Margaret whispered. She grabbed a napkin, placed it across her mouth, and then belched loudly.

Across the room from one another, Ewan and Marta made heavy eye contact. Marta thought she might fall in a fit of laughter if it weren't for the undulating fear in her heart.

"Ewan, how could you?" Aunt Margaret suddenly cried, finally executing the behaviour Lord Remington had assumed she would.

Ewan gripped Laura and held her close. "Mother, you know that I've longed for a deep and prosperous love. The kind of love that will stay with me for the rest of my days. And I've found her. Perhaps she isn't the sort you would have written out for me. But…"

"Would have written out for you? I planned to match you already next year!" Aunt Margaret blared.

“And what then, Mother? You match me with someone just as suited to me as Lord Remington is to Marta?” Ewan returned. “All you’ve spoken about is how much of a match they are. How wonderful he’ll be for her future. But have you once considered what Marta wants in all of this? Or are you too busy living under the assumption that none of us could possibly ever know what we want?”

Aunt Margaret looked altogether flabbergasted. She bit her lower lip and furrowed her brow. Her son wrapped his arms tighter around Laura and held her close. Suddenly, Aunt Margaret rushed from her chair, toppled it back behind her, and stomped towards the parlour. Marta rushed after her, her hand still entangled with Baldwin’s. Once there, they watched as Aunt Margaret tugged open the old cabinet to reveal what seemed to be a 50-year-old bottle of Scotch. Within seconds, she’d poured herself a stiff drink and collapsed on one of the fainting couches. Her eyes scanned the window, reflecting the light pinks of the evening.

One by one, everyone from Uncle Everett to Tatiana to Marta to Ewan to Baldwin to Laura poured themselves drinks and sat at the edge of the various seats through the parlour, all gazing inward. Even the young boys sat forlornly, as though they recognised the severity of the situation just as much as the adults.

Finally, Aunt Margaret spoke, “I suppose there was nothing we could do. Lord Remington isn’t the man I thought he was.”

“I could have told you that,” Ewan blurted.

Everyone glared at Ewan. It was clear that Aunt Margaret attempted to make amends of sorts. They didn’t need Ewan’s attitude in the mix.

“Regardless, it seems that Lord Remington has put us in a very unique and wretched position,” Aunt Margaret continued. She turned her eyes towards Marta. They glowed with tears. “I’m terribly sorry that I ever suited you up with the likes of that man, Marta. It’s clear to me now that your heart and soul hold lightness, while his remains in the dark. Perhaps it wasn’t initially obvious to me why you and Baldwin were drawn to one another. But in previous weeks, if I’m honest, I’ve noticed that Baldwin has taken a more optimistic view of the world. In other years, he might have never left his office, except for a few spare rides with Ewan across the moors. Now, he attends every ball. He dances. He laughs.”

Baldwin dropped his chin to his chest. Marta, who sat beside him, squeezed his hand hard. She wanted to translate how much she loved and adored him. She wanted him to know that she saw him before his transition; that she’d been drawn to him even though he’d decided to change.

He’d always been enough for her.

“But what shall we do now?” Tatiana suddenly blurted. “Lord Remington is poised to drag Ewan’s name through the mud. And with it, the Thompson family will be ruined.”

“As though you haven’t done your fair share of monstrous things,” Ewan said.

Laura reached up and swatted Ewan across the lap. Of course, Ewan referred to Tatiana’s affair—something that they’d all seemingly resolved not to discuss.

“Leave me out of this. I’m married to a proper man and have proper

children," Tatiana blurted.

"Let's focus on what we can do with this information at this time," Aunt Margaret resolved, sounding far more reasonable than she had in weeks. "I suppose the only thing we can do is ride this out."

"We will eventually recover from the gossip," Uncle Everett resolved.

Ewan gripped Laura's hand hard. He blinked from his mother to his father, then cast his eyes towards Marta and Baldwin.

"At the end of the day, one thing is sure and true," he said.

"What's that?" Marta asked.

"Laura will give birth to my child," Ewan said. "And I wish to love that child with all my heart and soul. For that reason, I wish to ask my mother and father to approve marriage to Laura. If you approve of it, all of this will go away. It will no longer quiver with gossip. It will be set. And we can announce it to the world."

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Everett exchanged glances. Marta reached across to Baldwin's hand and squeezed it hard. Laura's eyes found hers at that moment. She knew precisely what had occurred; her English was extraordinary. Marta knew it all wasn't due to her "tremendous" ability to teach. Rather, Laura had pushed herself into the language due to her love for Ewan.

This was remarkable in and of itself.

“This still may cause a few waves,” Aunt Margaret said, her voice low.

“Yes, but it would legitimise the situation,” Uncle Everett returned.

Everyone studied the ground for a long time. Outside, the wind ramped up and smashed against the window panes. When Marta looked at Laura once more, she noted the stony-nature of her cheeks, her forehead.

Suddenly, Laura spoke.

“I know that I’m not the daughter-in-law you might have planned for, Aunt Margaret,” she began.

Aunt Margaret looked at her bug-eyed. Marta laughed inwardly, remembering those first few encounters they’d had when Aunt Margaret had generally assumed the girl was a dunce.

“But I have fallen in love with your son. I don’t want to be with anyone else,” Laura said. “If you do not approve of our marriage, I will convince him to return with me to Austria. There, we will have more happiness, if only because we’ll be together. I know that Ewan will never truly get over leaving his country and you, however. And I suspect that you’ll never truly get over losing him, either.”

Aunt Margaret cleared her throat. “I never truly got over losing my

sister. All those miles away. Our letters became fewer and further between. I ached, knowing that we would never be as close as we were when we were younger. But the thought of losing my son to the same stupid country…"

Laura and Marta locked eyes dangerously, yet both decided not to insist Aunt Margaret utilise a different tone. She would never understand Austria. This was something both of them would have to accept.

"Oh, goodness. You've really put me under such stress." Aunt Margaret sighed. "But I suppose, ultimately, I must approve this union." Slowly, Aunt Margaret stood and walked towards Laura.

Laura rose as well. The women regarded one another for nearly a full minute: eyes locked, jaws set. Marta had always known Laura to be a powerful, strong-willed human. Now, her eyes bulged from their sockets, and she seemed more than willing to fight for what she wanted.

This was the sort of thing a mother had to do, Marta thought.

Perhaps she would know soon enough.

Suddenly, Aunt Margaret drew her arms around Laura and hugged her close. Laura looked genuinely shocked. She kept her arms to her sides for a moment as Aunt Margaret huddled against her. Finally, Laura matched the hug.

In German, Laura said, "I will come to love you, Aunt Margaret.

Mother Margaret. I truly will. Just give me time."

"I don't know what you said, Laura, but I imagine it had far more poetics to it than I can possibly comprehend," Aunt Margaret returned.

On the floor, the boys giggled, having understood. Tatiana shushed them as the hug broke. When Aunt Margaret turned back, she brushed a tear to the side and beamed at Baldwin and Marta.

"That settles it," she said. "Tomorrow, before Lord Remington's wretched deadline, we will make the announcement. A double engagement! What house could be luckier?"

"And we'll post the banns immediately afterwards!" Ewan cried.

Baldwin turned and kissed Marta's cheek. Laura threw herself into Ewan's arms and wept. Tatiana rushed to the cabinet to pour everyone another round of Scotch. Marta's heart felt lighter, her head clearer, than they had in many years.

She would marry the love of her life.

She wouldn't be scorned.

Ewan and Laura would remain on in England, and Laura would be her equal, her sister-in-law! It was all so splendid, so outside of her understanding of the severity of time, that Marta yearned to drop her

forehead against Baldwin's chest and heave with tears.

But there wasn't time. There was only time for celebration, for plotting, for ridding themselves of Lord Remington once and for all and finding space for the true love they'd crafted together.

The following day, as discussed, the Thompsons announced the double engagement between Marta Schnitzler and Baldwin Terrence and Ewan and his pregnant bride, Laura.

Several days after, Marta and Laura appeared in the village to shop for a wedding gown for Laura, as Ewan and Laura needed to rush to the alter. While there, Marta and Laura felt every eye upon them. Gossip swirled.

"Yes. I heard that Lord Remington was so enraged at Baldwin and Marta's engagement announcement that he broke half the plates in his mother's fine-china cabinet," one woman whispered.

"I heard that Ewan's fiancé is already pregnant. It's why they must hurry to the alter," another woman returned.

"My goodness! They've taken on as much gossip as they can, haven't they?" the other said. "I suppose Marta brought it with her from Austria. She's that sort of woman, isn't she? The sort to bring laughter and colour, certainly … but always with a dash of drama."

"I spoke with her briefly at a party," the other said. "She was altogether lovely. I haven't spoken at all with her maid … Ewan's soon-to-be wife…"

“Oh! What a scandal.”

Laura gripped Marta’s elbow and flashed her eyes towards the women ominously.

“We don’t have to murder them for being gossips,” Marta said with a laugh. “This is what they do with their time. They spend the day speaking about one another’s business. Including ours.”

“If I wasn’t pregnant, I would go over there and…”

“Laura, you’re a high-society lady, now,” Marta teased. “No more scrappy fighting.”

“Ugh. How dreadful,” Laura responded in English.

“Your accent is even quite stellar, now,” Marta returned. “You sound almost posh.”

“I’ve been practicing,” Laura said with a wide grin. “Ewan says it makes me sound even more important.”

Marta grinned. “You must tell me how that all happened. How you fell in love. How…”

“How? He’s impossible not to love!” Laura said. “I was all heartache and no pleasure for a good few days after my dear vegetable-man abandoned me. But I realised he was never right for me, anyway. It reminded me so of when you were heartbroken about the man we left back in Austria.”

“And now, I can hardly remember his name,” Marta said.

The women laughed as they looked at wedding dresses throughout the rest of the afternoon. Marta noted that Laura continually placed her hand across her still-flat stomach, as though she wanted to check in with the baby, remind the baby that she remained there, that she was always willing to listen, to be present.

“Did you imagine yourself having an English baby?” Marta asked, as Laura lifted a light yellow gown to her frame and tipped her hips this way, then that, analysing herself in the crooked mirror.

“I never imagined any of it,” Laura returned. “When you asked me to come to England with you, I assumed we’d be back in Austria by now. But goodness, you couldn’t pay me to be back there. Having that strange affair with one of the stable hands. Constantly wearing my hair in those awful braids! I had a headache nearly every day of my life. Now I drink tea in the afternoon like a lady. My time is my own.” She flashed her eyes playfully towards Marta and added, “We should really find you another lady-in-waiting, shouldn’t we?”

Marta laughed. “I think I’ll be all right on my own for a while.”

“Suit yourself,” Laura returned. “I imagine when Ewan and I move

into our own estate, I'll want a whole staff to myself. Perhaps I'll even hire a few straight from Austria… I want our house to flourish with both German and English languages, perhaps a few others thrown in for good measure. I want it to be bright and vibrant and alive. I want my child to open his lips and be able to speak to anyone across the world."

As they returned to the carriage, Marta spotted Penelope Sussel. Her eyes brightened as she scurried towards them, her arms extended.

"I've just heard the news!" she cried. "All my genuine congratulations."

Laura and Marta thanked her.

"I suppose it wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for you," Laura affirmed.

"Ewan is a good man. A great man. I'm simply too flighty, I suppose," Penelope said. She sounded vaguely regretful. "However, I've just heard something rather strange about your not-so-dear friend, Lord Remington."

Marta arched her brow. "What is it?"

"It seems that he grew so drunk last night that he insulted the Regent!" Penelope said. "There were a few onlookers. The Regent threatened him—said not to come any closer. And then, bang! Lord Remington punched the Regent in the nose!"

Marta's eyes bugged out. "What on earth! You cannot be serious."

"A friend said he heard the Regent declare that their friendship was over," Penelope continued. "At that point, of course, Lord Remington cursed your very existence. He pins it all on you. Unfair, of course, but quite funny. It's a powerful woman indeed who brings down a man like that."

Laura and Marta sat in the carriage and exchanged glances, both in complete shock. As the carriage wheels gained speed beneath them, Marta dropped her head back and whispered, "Lost the favour of the Regent. I cannot believe it."

"He was so volatile," Laura affirmed. "He was always on the brink of digging himself a hole he couldn't get out of."

"I suppose you're right," Marta whispered. "One never considers the change one has on society at large. But we tore into England, didn't we?"

"And we did whatever we pleased," Laura said.

"I'm grateful for it."

"Perhaps England will end all ties with Austria now. It's clear we're a more powerful breed," Laura said with a laugh.

“And yet, we love them,” Marta said.

“Dearly,” Laura agreed.

“Cripplingly,” Marta ended.

Chapter 34

“Now who is the handmaid?” Marta asked Laura. She was on her knees, stitching up the last of Laura’s buttons on her gorgeous dark green wedding dress, one that highlighted the bright ferocity of her blonde hair. When Laura turned to look down at Marta, Marta saw just the slightest hint of a baby bulge, a sight that made her seem all the more feminine.

“You do it quite well. If things don’t work out with Baldwin, I think I can get you some sort of job,” Laura said with a smile.

“Ha.” Marta drew up and blinked a final time at her dear friend, a woman on the brink of becoming Ewan Thompson’s young wife. “I feel I could fall over. I’m overwhelmed with emotion.”

“You cannot fall. I need you there with me. Every step of the way,” Laura said.

Marta stood in the cathedral alongside Baldwin while Laura and Ewan affirmed their love to one another at the early-morning ceremony. Fat tears rolled down Marta’s cheeks. She clutched Baldwin’s hand and eyed Aunt Margaret, who seemed similarly overwhelmed. She kept a handkerchief at her cheek throughout, seemingly on the verge of drenching herself. Uncle Everett beamed at his son and his beautiful wife. When the ceremony finished, and Ewan and Laura strutted down the aisle together, Uncle Everett cried out, “Vielspass!” which was German for, “Have fun!” Marta wondered how on earth he’d learned the words.

Outside, Marta and Baldwin and the other guests boarded their carriages once more. Marta faced Aunt Margaret on the way back to the estate. Her eyes were glazed over, her teeth pressed hard into her lower lip. When she finally turned her eyes to Marta's, she whispered, "I've never seen a more beautiful bride."

"I know," Marta returned. "She really was the most beautiful."

"I don't know where my hesitation ever came from," Aunt Margaret returned. She furrowed her brow. "But now, she's my daughter-in-law. Nothing of her past affects that. And you know what she told me last evening? She told me that she could even teach me a bit of her language and a few of her traditions if I wanted it. She's entirely welcoming. She keeps no record of my past horrors…" Her bottom lip quaked. "I have never known a kinder soul."

Back at the estate, they feasted on a post-wedding breakfast inside the ballroom, seated at a very long dining table, such was the custom in England. Marta marvelled that she'd never been to an English wedding. "Funny that the first one features an Austrian I brought over myself," she said to Baldwin, making him quake with laughter.

"Funny that your second one will be yours," Baldwin whispered back.

They'd decided on a date: the day directly after Baldwin's birthday, his twenty-sixth, to ensure that they wouldn't have to rely on the Regent's decision at all. Although the Regent and Lord Remington had completely lost touch already, Baldwin didn't want to ask anyone's permission to marry "the love of his life." This stubbornness was something Marta adored about him.

For Laura and Ewan's wedding, Laura's mother had been brought over from Austria. Marta spotted her at the far end of the dining room and gave her a sturdy wave, then beckoned her over. The woman was clearly terrified, wearing a dress that Laura had picked for her that suited the English style, rather than the Austrian one. When she appeared before Marta, she immediately tore into a frantic German speech. "I don't know quite what to do with myself! Laura has told me that I can stay on in England here if I want to, that there would be no need for me to work as a servant any longer. But imagine it! Never seeing the Austrian mountains again! Can I possibly handle it?"

Marta hugged her close. She felt the frantic pounding of the woman's heart and knew it to be directly related to her own fears of heartache, of sadness. When she drew back, she said, "I will return to Austria to visit at least once a year for the rest of my life. You will come with me. You and Laura. And we will walk through the mountains and eat schnitzel and dance and sing. When we return to England, we will live like proper English ladies, drinking our tea and sitting in our gardens. We will never worry about anything ever again. And you will be allowed to help Laura raise her beautiful baby. Don't you want that? Don't you want to ensure that he or she speaks German just as well as you do?"

Laura's mother nodded. "I will remain here. Laura is my life, my love. Her father is long-gone." She gave a sad smile. "And I'm so pleased that Laura is allowed this sort of future. This time with a man she loves so dearly. I've never seen her so happy."

Uncle Everett rose and clinked his fork against his champagne glass. The crowd across the long dinner table stopped their frantic conversation.

"Good afternoon!" Uncle Everett said, clearing his throat.

Suddenly, Walter lunged back from his little chair and scampered across the ballroom. Malcolm followed, his fists over his chest as he hollered. Laura stood, a tiny grin stitching up on her cheeks. Uncle Everett looked at the scene, incredulous, and then cast his eyes towards Tatiana. Tatiana shrugged.

“Can’t you control them?” Uncle Everett asked her.

“I believe the bride is the only one who can,” Tatiana returned.

Seconds later, Malcolm and Walter appeared back in the ballroom. Walter held a massive bouquet of flowers, which the boys seemed to have created themselves, such was the state of its messiness. Laura flowed out from her seat of honour and then dropped down so that her eyes were on-level with the boys’.

“Are those for me?” she asked them in German.

At this, Laura’s mother grabbed Marta’s elbow and whispered, “What on earth? Do those boys know German?”

“She taught them,” Marta returned.

Walter brought the bouquet forward. His chin bunched up and then bounced around. He looked on the verge of tears. Laura accepted the bouquet and closed her eyes and inhaled. “I love them,” she whispered, in English this time.

The boys answered in German. “You’ve been our greatest friend,” Malcolm began.

“I hope we won’t lose you now that you’re married and a proper lady,” Walter said.

“We still want you to play with us in the garden,” Malcolm said.

“But Uncle Ewan isn’t allowed,” Walter returned.

Laura’s smile was enormous. She glanced back towards her new husband, who shrugged.

“What on earth did you do to these poor boys?” she asked him.

Ewan shrugged. “They know you’re the better one of the two of us.”

Laura turned her blue eyes back to the boys. “You know you were my first friends in England,” she told them. “You both recognised that I was a human, rather than just a maid. Because of you boys, I felt that I belonged. I will never forget that. Not as long as I live.”

Malcolm and Walter rushed forward, drew their arms around her neck, and huddled against her. Everyone in the ballroom roared with joy. When the cheering ended, Uncle Everett again clacked his fork against his glass. The crowd died down, whilst Laura led the boys back to the table.

But before Uncle Everett could speak, Aunt Margaret shot up from the table and cleared her throat. Again, Uncle Everett cast his eyes towards her in confusion.

Aunt Margaret didn't notice. Instead, she began to speak.

"I want to announce to everyone just how thrilled I am to welcome Laura and her mother to our family," she said. "I know that I can be a troublesome woman. But, darling Laura, I couldn't have envisioned a better life for my son, Ewan, nor for my grandchildren, Malcolm and Walter. Thank you. Danke. Danke, forever."

Everyone toasted to Laura and Ewan. Right there, in front of everyone, they kissed. Marta's heart felt squeezed. At that moment, Baldwin rushed towards her and kissed her, as well, an act that nobody noticed beyond the two of them.

She couldn't wait to officially join together with him. She couldn't wait to live out the rest of her life with Baldwin and Laura and Ewan by her side.

Chapter 35

Over the next months, Laura's stomach thrust itself out, sure of itself, preparing for baby Thompson. Marta rejoiced in every second. She helped the cook prepare special meals, always sat beside Laura when she was sick, and spent as much time with her as possible, when she wasn't busy preparing for her own wedding. This, of course, was something that Laura also helped her with.

"I'll never look the way you did on your wedding day. So beautiful. So vibrant. So ready for the baby you'd already created. It's as though your day had a bigger purpose than mine ever could," Marta told Laura.

"Don't be foolish," Laura said. She chuckled. "Baldwin looks at you as though you're the sun itself. I've never seen anything more beautiful."

Now, when they spoke German, they did it with harsher syllables and more rejoicing. It was such a rare thing, something they knew was their own. They loved speaking it in the village, forcing everyone to cast their eyes in their direction with confusion. It felt a bit like their trick.

When they searched for Marta's wedding dress, Laura was about five months pregnant and walked continually with her hands at the base of her back. "This baby had better understand all the horror I'm going through for his life," Laura said, leaning against the wall at the dressmaker's. "I cannot imagine that all the people in the world are a result of this pain."

Although they spoke in German, the dressmaker seemed to understand what they spoke of. “I thought I’d never give birth to the thing. Now, he’s of course grown and in love, with fresh opinions of his own. But when he protruded from my own body? I thought it was monstrous.”

Laura and Marta exchanged glances and laughed. The dressmaker smacked her hand across her mouth and then said, “Oh, goodness me. I didn’t mean to utter such a ridiculous thing. My husband is always telling me to keep my trap shut.”

“Don’t worry yourself. In our family, we appreciate honesty far more than anything else,” Marta said.

“You must not be English, then,” the dressmaker said, catching the accent. “In England, we’re far more eager to avoid the truth, so long as nobody is hurt.”

“And yet, in our experience, that always leads to far more trouble,” Laura affirmed.

“You’re much wiser than I,” the dressmaker said. “Which means your children will carry that wisdom forward and craft a much better England for all of us.”

“I hope you’re right,” Marta whispered.

**

Marta and Baldwin were married the day after his twenty-sixth birthday, as planned, in the very cathedral where Laura and Ewan had said their vows. Marta stood before him beneath that mighty ceiling, her blue eyes heavy with tears, as Baldwin pledged his life to her. With each thud of her heart, she felt the weight of her own words, pledging herself back.

Her father and mother had come to England for the occasion, a fact that had surprised her. At the wedding breakfast, she fell into a heartfelt hug with her father, who told her in German that he'd never been more proud of her. Her mother's face was a bit stony, strange. Marta stood before her, contemplating what she was meant to say first. After all, they'd hardly spoken since her mother had "banned" her to England.

Of course, her mother started off on the wrong foot.

"I dare say I knew this would be appropriate for you," she said, her gaze stony.

"Whatever do you mean, Mother?" Marta asked, although she knew precisely what she meant.

"I knew that you would come to England and meet the man you wanted to spend the rest of your life with," her mother said.

"Must you always tell everyone how correct you are?" Marta returned.

Her mother's eyes bugged out. Baldwin stepped forward, grinning

broadly. He gripped Marta's hand hard, an assurance that she was all right—there was nothing to fear or grow angry about.

"I believe what your mother is trying to say is," her father interjected. He glanced down at her mother, hesitant. His English wasn't so good, and he seemed to stutter a bit, looking for the words.

How was it they'd been married for so many years? How was it they could hardly communicate?

"I believe she wants to tell you how proud she is. And how grateful she is to Baldwin for choosing to build a life with you," her father said, his words delicate.

"Choosing to build a life with me," Marta said contemplatively.

"I couldn't have chosen anyone else," Baldwin admitted. "She changed everything the moment I saw her."

"You'll visit us, won't you?" her mother said suddenly.

Marta was shocked at the sudden question. It had seemed clear that her mother wanted nothing to do with her, that she wanted to rid herself of her, thrust her back to England.

Now, she saw how much her mother missed her.

“I will visit you as much as I can,” Marta murmured.

Again, her motions violent, her mother flung herself forward and hugged her tight. Marta shuddered with sadness, with love. Memories buzzed through her mind: all involving her mother and father beneath their Austrian mountain range. All things had to come to an end, yet it felt difficult, horrendous, that one couldn’t go back to the way things used to be.

**

Baldwin and Marta stayed in Marta’s bedroom that night. Marta crumpled into his arms with exhaustion and placed her forehead on his shoulder. His massive hands found her lower back as he whispered in her ear.

“I love you more right now than I’ve ever loved you, and I will continue to love you just as much into the future and beyond. Probably even more,” he said.

Marta leaned back and took in the handsome face, the black eyes. She could feel it: the memory of all the times they’d had, the era when she hadn’t been sure she’d be allowed to have what she so wanted. Now, she was in his arms forever.

His hands clasped over her breasts and tugged at the fabric. Within moments, her dress flung itself across the floor, and her nipples thrust into his hands. He placed her across the bed and slowly removed her petticoats, the rest of her corset until she was fresh and clean and naked before him, her belly flat, her breasts round and glowing and vibrant, her legs splayed open so that he could see the soft peach skin

between her thighs. She glanced down and placed her hand there to feel it—wet, wanting him.

He removed his clothes quickly and brought himself over her. His thick member dangled down, with a small drop of cum at the very end, glistening in the soft candlelight.

“I’m going to make love to you now as your husband,” he whispered gruffly in her ear.

Her fingers traced over his back lovingly. As he entered her, she cried out softly and pressed her nails into his skin. Gradually, they fell into a beautiful rhythm, with their eyes focused on one another. Never again would they ever be apart. Never again would they have to fight for their love. It was there before them. It was all they needed.

THE END

Can't get enough of Marta and Baldwin? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

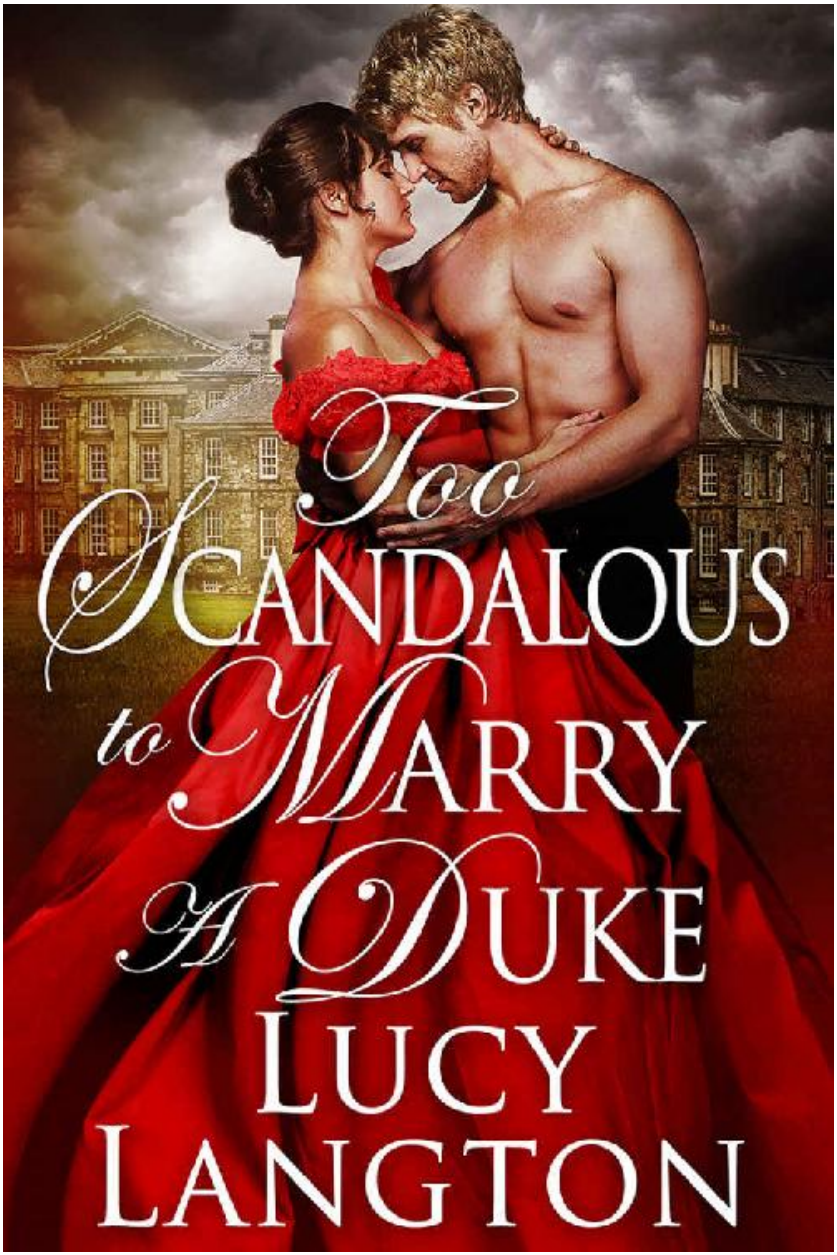
Why will Marcus and Walter decide to move away and where will they go?

Why will Laura and the children secretly speak German when Ewan is in the room?

How will Frank manage to convince Greta to move to England?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://lucylangton.com/marta

(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from ***"Too Scandalous to Marry a Duke"****, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


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to Marry
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Langton

Introduction

In an instant, Miss Nicolette De Burgh's world turned upside down, when her dear mother passed away. A few years later, her father remarried and as if this was not enough, her new step sister, Miss Daniella, has been trying to prove her superiority in every way possible ever since. However, tensions will run high when Nicolette meets Daniella's childhood friend, the dashing Mr. Eric Masters, future heir to the Duke of Terrace. When her eyes meet his dazzling blue eyes, desire instantly sparks inside her. Will she fight a love that makes her heart flutter? Or will Nicolette let Daniella win this time?

Mr. Eric Masters is an attractive young man with a lopsided grin that makes young ladies lose control of themselves. Although he strives to make his parents proud, his playful nature renders him unwilling to give up his freedom just yet. Forced by his parents to find a suitable match and trapped in an undesirable future, Eric never expected to be introduced to an alluring Lady, who will make his heart shiver. Much to his surprise, he finds himself lost in a game of love and passion. Nicolette is fiery enough to drive a Duke to his knees...but will she manage to make Eric reconsider marriage?

A series of unexpected events will lead the two stepsisters to war, fighting for the heart of the dashing Duke-to-be. Trying to endure all

the obstacles that emerge, Eric and Nicolette find themselves closer to each other than ever, and desire can no longer be denied. Will they withstand Daniella's scrutiny? Or will Nicolette have the last word?

Chapter 1

Miss Nicolette De Burgh's mind wandered as she sat in the garden, the roses in bloom before her. The beauty of them had caused her mind to shift back in time when she used to walk the garden with her mother and observe the roses and the other types of flora. She smiled to herself, thinking of all the things her mother was trying to teach her at that age about the different plants. And all she had been focused on was the joy of being with her mother.

Nicolette sighed heavily, trying her best to picture her mother's features in her mind. She knew that her mother had the same black hair as she did and matching bright blue eyes. But had she been tall or short? How did she do her hair normally? What was her favourite colour of dress?

After losing her mother to typhoid when Nicolette was only five years old, it became harder each day to remember the small details of her mother's likeness. Now she was eighteen, it was a real struggle to remember her mother as clearly as she would have liked to.

The one thing Nicolette knew for sure is how much her mother had loved flowers and plants. Roses were her favourite, of course, and therefore Nicolette had always insisted that rose bushes be maintained in the garden behind the townhouse. Nicolette would either tend to the roses herself, or work alongside the hired gardener, Mr Franklin.

This was the place that Nicolette could always retreat to and be confident that no one would bother her. On hot days, when most people wouldn't venture outside, she was in the garden with her sun hat on, enjoying the smell of the garden mixed with the warmth of the sun. But it seemed besides her father and her governess, Miss Hall, she was the only one who truly loved the garden or do anything to see

them maintained.

The sound of singing drifted across the garden on the breeze, and Nicolette sighed with irritation. It was one of the most awful sounds she had ever heard. And since the song was being conducted by her stepsister, Miss Daniella, she couldn't really escape it no matter how far into the garden she walked. That was because Daniella insisted on singing facing the garden because she was convinced the fresh air gave her a better singing voice. But anyone who had the unfortunate opportunity to hear her sing would agree that there was no hope for the young lady.

Nicolette rose from the stone bench, frustrated about her deep thoughts being interrupted as she wandered deeper into the garden, following the maze of hedges to the small fountain. There at least the sound of running water was able to smother the horrible singing voice that made its way into the garden.

For the last two years, Nicolette had had to bear many things when it came to her stepsister. When her father had announced that he was remarrying, Nicolette had done her best to be happy for him. She was going to have a mother figure in her life for the first time since her own had passed away. And, she was going to gain a sister from the marriage. It had been a happy thought for Nicolette as she had always wanted a sister, and with Daniella being older, she was certain that her new sister would be a model for her.

What Nicolette actually learned from gaining new family members was that her stepmother was a very timid creature who was very softly spoken and liked to keep to herself, while her daughter was a very outspoken young lady of twenty who was quick to share her opinion on every matter as though she contained a wealth of knowledge that no one else could possibly have. Therefore, Daniella was quick to judge and criticise Nicolette to the point that she was convinced her sister took great pleasure in proving her wrong.

“No, Nicolette, you shouldn’t walk like that. Your shoulders must be rotated back more so your posture is better. No one wants a hunchback for a wife,” Daniella would lecture while they were on outings, making Nicolette suddenly self-conscious and worried about who might have heard her sister scolding her unnecessarily. After all, her governess had never commented on her lack of good posture.

“Nicolette, you must drink your tea with your little finger extended,” Daniella had said during a tea party with the wives of all her father’s business partners. It was up to the De Burgh women to entertain the women while the men were conducting business matters. Nicolette had done her best not to feel embarrassed she wasn’t drinking tea in the latest fashion.

“Come now, Nicolette. You really shouldn’t wear such a shabby gown,” was one of Daniella’s favourite comments. Especially when she had just returned from tending to the garden. Nicolette would always wear the day gowns that were more worn, and though Daniella knew the pleasurable work she was doing, she still seemed to always criticise her about it.

With the season in town soon beginning, with winter having given way to spring, there was much talk about balls, dinner parties, and other social outings that would certainly occupy the family’s attention. With Daniella being the eldest De Burgh young lady, the pressure was on her to marry well and be settled. When Lady De Burgh spoke, it was often on this topic. And Daniella would surely agree with her mother and talk of nothing else for the rest of the day.

It was no doubt the reason she was practicing her singing voice right now to hopefully seduce a man into marrying her. Nicolette smiled to herself, knowing that if Daniella did gather up the courage to sing in front of others, she would send everyone running for the hills.

Nicolette turned her thoughts towards her own expectations for the season. Having debuted two seasons earlier, she was certainly out by society's standards. However, she hadn't really gone after any particular gentleman.

She wasn't in a hurry to marry, and if she was truly being honest with herself, she would very much rather wait to find the perfect man who she could actually love than jump into marriage with the first gentleman who offered her a comfortable life. With her father being the Earl of Chessington and a very successful businessman, it wouldn't be hard for her to find a suitable match.

Nicolette understood how important it was for her to marry well. Though Daniella was convinced that she would be the one to marry into a better family, Nicolette did not care about rank or social standing as long as she could truly love the man she married. With Daniella's late father having been a duke, she had pretty lofty goals when it came to the type of man she would marry.

"My husband will be a duke or a son of a duke, soon to inherit his birthright. Then I shall be a duchess like my mother was and return to the comfortable life I've been used to," Daniella would say when it was just the two of them in the sitting room. Nicolette would be trying to study one of her botany books and Daniella would have taken it upon herself to lecture her on the importance of matrimony and what Nicolette should be doing differently to entice the opposite sex.

"No one likes a wife who has more knowledge than them. You shouldn't bother yourself with your studies and instead become proficient in needlework," she would say.

"Then I suppose I shall need to find an intelligent man to marry so my

knowledge of plants doesn't offend him," Nicolette would retort back, closing her book and finding somewhere else in the house to read. The only other place to hide from her stepsister was her own bed-chamber. But on warm days, she'd much rather be out in the garden as a way to escape her current situation.

Nicolette was confident that one day she would marry, but she would marry for love. The man she would say "I do" to would love her for who she was, for her in-depth knowledge of flowers and plants, and her more adventurous side. For a woman who loved horseback riding as much as she did spending time in the garden, Nicolette knew she wasn't the typical young lady of high society. But she still had hope in her heart that she was capable of being loved completely by a wonderful man she would love in return.

Chapter 2

Nicolette's deep thoughts were interrupted by the soft footsteps of someone approaching through the garden. Nicolette stood from the bench she'd been sitting on and rounded the garden to see Miss Hall coming her way. The woman was wearing a cream-coloured gown, using her gloved hand to shield her eyes from the sun. Her long brown hair had been braided into a simple design. And as Nicolette observed her, she saw that she held a new book in her hand.

"Miss Nicolette, you are late for your afternoon lessons," Miss Hall called out as she approached. Nicolette picked up the hem of her gown and hurried towards Miss Hall, having truly lost track of time.

"Forgive me, Miss Hall. I had not realised it was that time of day," Nicolette said as she neared her governess.

"Did you at least eat during the noon meal?" Miss Hall asked, looking down at her with dark brown eyes. Miss Hall was quite tall for a woman, which was no doubt one of the reasons she became a governess when she couldn't find a suitable man to marry.

"I have been outside for quite a long time," Nicolette admitted. "I have not eaten since breakfast."

Miss Hall sighed as she gestured for Nicolette to follow her. She turned and led them towards the house as she said, "Miss Nicolette, you must be more mindful of time. You can't sustain yourself if you keep skipping meals."

“I get carried away sometimes and just lose track of time,” Nicolette admitted.

“Then perhaps you should start carrying a pocket watch,” Miss Hall suggested. “The ticking of the clock would help you remember that time does exist.”

“That is truly an idea,” Nicolette said, wanting to at least agree with her governess. Miss Hall held the back door open for them so they could enter. As they passed through the house, through the drawing room, they made their way to the study where Nicolette took all her lessons with Miss Hall. Her governess asked one of the maids for a tea tray to be brought to the study so Nicolette could eat during her lesson.

“Really, Miss Hall. I will be fine until dinner,” Nicolette said as they entered the study together. She went to the window and pulled open the curtains, letting in plenty of light.

“Miss Nicolette, you need your sustenance. You can eat and learn at the same time,” Miss Hall said as she set the next book down on the desk. As Nicolette approached, she quickly read the title on the spine and smiled.

“I have not read this botany book before,” Nicolette said happily, looking back up at her governess.

“It’s a good thing that your father is so doting, Miss Nicolette. He allows you to study to your heart’s desire instead of having you

practice singing, dancing and modern languages."

"There is no use for such things after marriage," Nicolette reasoned. "At least my study of plants will sustain my pleasure for years if I can't receive the same pleasure from my future husband." Miss Hall laughed as they settled down at the desk together.

"You certainly have particular ideas about marriage," Miss Hall replied.

"I feel as though I have reasonable ideas about marriage. Compared to another young lady I know, I feel as though I am much more prepared for married life than most," Nicolette said, lowering her voice in case anyone was listening to their conversation. Nicolette knew how much Daniella liked to snoop. And since she could no longer hear her dreadful singing voice, Nicolette knew the woman could be anywhere.

"In that case, why don't you enlighten me?" Miss Hall asked as she set the new book aside, causing Nicolette to sigh once more. She didn't want to talk about marriage. She wanted to read the new book.

"The way I perceive marriage is this," Nicolette said, focusing her eyes on her governess instead of the book. "A young lady will either marry for comfort and safety, living a separate life from her husband until the need for an heir must be produced. Therefore, the wife needs to find her own pleasures in life through hobbies or child-raising while the husband continues on as he always has, and more than likely with a mistress or two.

"Or, a young lady can marry for love, embarking on the adventure of marriage in an honest union. They are more likely of living a life together instead of two parallel lives. Then, everything from hobbies

to pastimes could be shared and enjoyed together. In some cases, the couple realise that married life isn't all that it's cracked up to be and no doubt take lovers anyway."

Miss Hall was giggling by the time she finished her speech, and it took some time for her mirth to subside. Thankfully, a tea tray had been brought in by one of the footmen and Nicolette was busy fixing herself a piece of toast with sliced boiled eggs and butter.

"You have such an interesting perspective on the world," Miss Hall agreed when she was able to compose herself once more. Nicolette poured tea for the two of them and proceeded to sip on hers as she thumbed through the new book.

"Sometimes I wonder if I should begin to write down my theologies on life," Nicolette mused. "It could be titled, *The Realistically Absurd Ideas Of A Young Lady*." Her comment only sent Miss Hall into another giggle fit, and Nicolette herself had to regain her composure before she could continue her meal.

"You should call your book instead, *The Rantings of a Lunatic*," Daniella said with a chuckle as she came into the study, obviously having overheard their conversation.

Nicolette set aside her toast, the need to eat soon fleeing her as the woman came near. Daniella had dazzling blonde hair that was so golden it almost looked white. Her honey-coloured eyes matching her naturally red lips made her a very attractive creature. It was when Daniella opened her mouth that she proved just how ugly she could be.

"Are you in need of assistance?" Nicolette asked as she took a sip of

her tea.

“Not at all. It appears, however, that you may need my assistance as your governess still continues to teach you things that are of no use,” Daniella said, looking at the book on the desk. Nicolette tried to refrain from rolling her eyes as she set her teacup aside and focused her attention on Daniella in order to confront the woman.

“Miss Hall is a modern woman of keen understanding. Much unlike the nanny you used to have,” Nicolette retorted, always willing to stand up for Miss Hall when Daniella treated her no better than a servant to be ordered around. Nicolette watched as Daniella narrowed her eyes at Nicolette, placing her hands on her hips.

“You should be learning proper dance steps for the upcoming balls. Or how to have a pleasant conversation at the dinner table if for some miracle a gentleman asks you to accompany him,” Daniella said.

“And your nanny should have taught you when to mind your own business and not meddle in the affairs of others,” Nicolette said, standing to her feet.

“How dare you?” Daniella scoffed.

“How dare you interrupt my lessons?” Nicolette quickly replied.

“Enough!” came a voice from the doorway. Everyone turned to see Lady De Burgh standing behind Daniella. It wasn’t often that Lady De Burgh spoke up, and it surprised them all to hear such a loud sound come from the timid woman.

Lady De Burgh approached, her burgundy gown sweeping around her. Even though she was simply a countess now, she never stopped dressing like the duchess she had been for more than twenty years. A dazzling gold necklace hung around her neck, a locket containing the words her husband had wrote to her before his death.

“Daniella, you shouldn’t be interrupting your sister’s lessons, regardless of the topic,” Lady De Burgh scolded. Daniella lowered her hands from her hips and her eyes to the polished wood floors. Nicolette was surprised by the dominating tone in her stepmother’s voice. This was very unlike her and it made Nicolette wonder what might have caused the woman to change so suddenly.

“Now, we will be having a very special dinner guest this evening, so you two need to be on your best behaviour,” Lady De Burgh announced.

“Really? Who?” Daniella quickly asked as she looked up, a bright smile on her face. Nicolette wasn’t really all that interested, but as she clasped her hands together, she thought she could at least show her stepmother respect by keeping her mouth shut.

“An old family friend is coming to visit,” she happily said. “And one of you could be very lucky by making such a match.”

Nicolette should have known that the only thing that stirred life into the former duchess was talk of marriage. While Daniella excitedly clapped her hands, Nicolette took her seat once more at the desk, reaching across the table to gather her new book in her hands.

“You should help me pick out a suitable gown for this evening,” Daniella suggested to her mother.

“That would be the best use of your time,” Lady De Burgh said as she led her daughter from the room. But Nicolette caught sight of Daniella looking over her shoulder and sticking her tongue out at her. Nicolette didn’t fall to her taunting and instead simply looked away.

“Don’t you think you should join them and possibly get some insight on this dinner guest?” Miss Hall suggested as Nicolette finally took a bite of her toast.

“Anyone that Lady De Burgh suggests as a suitable match will certainly not interest me in the least,” Nicolette said. “I shall dress as I always do and give Daniella the opportunity. The powers above certainly know that as soon as that woman is married, the rest of our lives will be far easier.”

Miss Hall hid her smiling face behind her gloved hand while Nicolette smiled and dove into her new book.

Chapter 3

Mr Eric Masters was riding in his phaeton with four horses as he travelled through town towards the home of Lord De Burgh for dinner. He'd been invited to join the family for dinner by Lady De Burgh. And since his father had been very close with the late duke, Eric thought it would be fitting to accept the invitation and pay respects to the former duchess. And, since she was now remarried, he could congratulate her on her new marriage.

When Eric had been very young, his father and the late duke had spent much time together in their respective country estates. It was during these times that Eric formed a love for hunting when he would witness his father and close friends enjoying the hunt and returning home in the evening to talk of their tales of pursuit. It was something Eric later in life learned to enjoy for himself. And when he was able, he spent more time in the country than he did in town.

But things were now changing for Eric. He was older, almost twenty-five, and had been impressed upon by his parents to start considering the matter of marriage. At first, Eric had revolted against the idea. He enjoyed his freedom, his love for the hunt, and cared very little about business like his father did. But after having a heart-to-heart conversation with his father, he was able to learn more about the real ideologies of marriage.

"Eric, a wife is like a daily companion. When you want company, you have company. But for the most part, life continues for the husband after marriage while the wife is occupied with child-rearing and her own personal interests," his father had lectured. "Do not fear that your life is over if you marry. Just see it as a way to improve upon yourself as you continue to do as you always have. The dukedom will support your family even if you don't enter into commerce like I have."

Eric had gained much re-assurance from his father and mother alike. Though he knew that their marriage had been arranged, Eric had never known discontent between the two of them as they had a mutual fondness for one another. Eric knew it wasn't love, but they had lived a very happy life.

Therefore, as Eric travelled across town towards the De Burgh residence, he kept in mind that there were two eligible young ladies at the home. There was the daughter that Eric faintly remembered from his childhood, Miss Daniella. Eric had been more focused on outdoor adventures than little girls and therefore couldn't really picture her in his mind. All he could think of was that she never wanted to play with him because she was worried about ruining her dress.

As Eric contemplated marriage, there was one thing he was truly hoping for. Though it was rarely and hardly ever seen, he hoped to marry for love instead of convenience or fortune. It had always been an idea in his head that when he felt the need to settle down and start a family of his own, that he would be completely in love with the woman he married so that their married days would be filled with only bliss.

Eric was certain that his parents would think he was mad with foolish fairy-tale ideas. But there was still hope in his heart that such a thing could be possible. He wanted to hope for love and therefore decided that he would try to meet several different young ladies to see for himself if true love was even possible.

When the phaeton pulled to a stop and the door was opened for him by the footman, Eric alighted from the vehicle and stopped for a moment outside the townhouse. Though Lord De Burgh was an earl of good standing and fortune, the house did not look as grand as his own father's. Eric was not one to judge anyone on appearances. He had

high hopes for the evening and that it would be enjoyable.

Eric made his way towards the front door, pulling down on the lapels of his dinner jacket. As he pulled the cord at the door, he fiddled with his cravat, making sure it was still on properly. When the door was opened and he was greeted by the family butler, Eric was full of confidence and pleasant demeaner.

After handing his top hat and gloves to a waiting footman, he was shown into the drawing room. He noted the polished wooden floors, nice yet not like the marble floors of his own home. Different paintings lined the hallway of various landscapes, and it made him wonder if someone in the house was a great painter, or if Lord De Burgh was simply an enthusiast of art.

“Ah, Mr Masters,” Eric was greeted as he stepped into the drawing room and was quickly approached by Lady De Burgh. He smiled kindly at the woman, thinking she had aged quite a bit since they had last met. But she was still a warm woman that Eric was pleased to see again.

“Thank you for joining me and my family for dinner. May I introduce you to my husband, Lord De Burgh,” she said, gesturing to the man at her side. Eric dipped his head towards the earl, thinking the man looked rather friendly, a bright smile on his face.

“The pleasure is all mine, madam. It has been quite some time since our last visit. I wish you happiness in your marriage, though my condolences are quite late,” Eric said.

“Fear not, Mr Masters. I hear you reside mostly in the countryside,” Lord De Burgh said.

“I do, sir. I personally find it more enjoyable than town life,” Eric admitted.

“No harm in knowing what one likes in life,” Lord De Burgh happily agreed.

“Might I introduce you to my daughter once more, Mr Masters? You two were quite young the last time you were around one another,” Lady De Burgh said.

She turned and gestured towards the young lady with light blonde hair. Miss Daniella smiled brightly as she approached slowly, her ivory gown reflecting the candlelight. Eric could readily agree that Miss Daniella was a beautiful young lady that any man would be happy to marry on appearance alone.

“Hello, Mr Masters. It’s so good to see you again,” Miss Daniella said as she curtsied low, giving Eric a clear look at her décolletage. Eric dipped his head towards her, a small smile on his lips.

“Hello Miss Daniella. Pleased to meet you once more,” Eric replied.

“And my daughter is in our party tonight as well,” Lord De Burgh said, stepping aside and gesturing towards another young lady.

She had just set aside a book as she approached him. Eric’s lips parted as he looked at the young lady with black hair as dark as coal, yet

bright blue eyes like sapphires. Her skin was a little tanned, clearly showing that she spent more time outside than most young ladies did. She wore a dark green gown, something more young ladies did not wear during the season. But it made her appear almost mythical.

“My daughter, Miss Nicolette,” Lord De Burgh introduced.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Eric said, trying not to forget his manners as he dipped his head.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Miss Nicolette replied as she righted herself, having not fallen into such a deep curtsy as her stepsister. When their eyes met once more after the introduction, Eric felt a spark of something whip down his arms, forcing him to clench his fists for a moment. He wasn’t sure what the sensation was, but he liked it.

Chapter 4

Nicolette was intrigued by the dinner guest. As they all settled into seating around the drawing room, waiting for dinner to be announced, Nicolette listened to the conversation around her when she would have normally lost herself in a book. Nicolette was certainly taken by the gentleman's good looks. His short brown hair framed his angular face, and she felt as though she could be lost in his deep green eyes forever.

"Lady De Burgh, my mother tells me that you attended the charity luncheon with the other women of Backer Street," Mr Masters said once they were all settled.

"Yes, it was a wonderful event to raise money for the local orphanage. My daughter, Daniella, is a very charitable young lady who influenced me to accept the invitation from your mother. We did attend together," Lady De Burgh said, motioning towards her daughter. Nicolette did her best not to laugh because she could easily see that the mother was trying to show off her daughter regardless of the truth of the matter.

"My mother said she enjoyed your company, as always," the gentleman replied.

"Mr Masters, what often keeps you in the countryside?" Lord De Burgh asked. Nicolette thought the man looked very handsome when he smiled.

“I have inherited my father’s love for the hunt. The spring is often my favourite time in the countryside when I can watch all manner of life come alive. Come autumn, I already have a good idea of what I’d like to hunt,” he said.

“My word, I have not hunted since before my first marriage,” Lord De Burgh said with a chuckle. “But I will admit that there is certainly a thrill to the sport.”

“It is the thrill of the chase that I love so much,” Mr Masters admitted.

“No doubt something you learned from our fathers,” Daniella said then. “I remember from our childhood how you’d often play in the forest, pretending you were hunting one thing or another.” Mr Masters laughed as he nodded, the sound music to Nicolette’s ears.

“Yes, I did often go on little adventures while our fathers were out on a hunt. I would pretend I was hunting animals I had heard about from Africa, how I would show off my success to all my friends,” Mr Masters agreed.

“Do you have many mounts in your home?” Nicolette asked, curious to know what Mr Masters did with his successful hunts.

“No, not too many,” Mr Masters admitted as he turned his eyes on her. Looking into his eyes was like drinking a glass of refreshing, cool water on a hot day.

“Most of the trophies are either used for dinner or prepared and donated to families in need. I have a close working relationship with

the local butcher to know which families could use the meat. The hides are given to the tanner, who works with the cobbler. So, you could say that my hobby helps the neighbourhood," he explained.

"Our fathers' charitable actions really impressed upon both of us," Daniella said, drawing Mr Masters' attention back to her. Nicolette felt she was only released from his spell when their eye contact was broken, and she remembered to breathe once more. Nicolette was trying to understand what had come over her because she had never felt this way towards a man, and she'd been introduced to plenty of eligible gentlemen the last two seasons.

"Yes, I do believe that they have both been a great influence on me," Mr Masters agreed. "What pastimes do you enjoy, Miss Daniella?"

"Oh me?" Daniella said, her cheeks blushing. Nicolette wondered what dirty thought she had to think about to do such a thing on cue. "Well, I enjoy what most women of my rank and station enjoy. Drawing, painting, playing the pianoforte. When I am not helping others, I like to practice my singing."

"How lovely," was Mr Masters' reply, a small smile on his lips. "And what about you, Miss Nicolette?"

Nicolette brightened at the opportunity to explain her passions and happily said, "I enjoy my botany studies. Most of my time is either spent out in the garden or in the study reading new books on the subject." She noted the way Mr Masters' eyebrows raised in surprise and feared she had put him off.

"My word, I have never heard of a young lady who enjoyed studying botany," Mr Masters exclaimed. "How interesting." The way his lips

tugged into a smile helped Nicolette relax and to think perhaps she hadn't scared him off.

"What you'd find most interesting is that Miss De Burgh also is an avid horseback rider," Daniella said then, turning her nose up at Nicolette as though her hobbies were a sin.

"Really? What horse do you ride?" Mr Masters asked, seeming not to be scared off by Daniella's declaration.

Nicolette smiled as she explained, "I have a mare that is a Suffolk Punch." The surprised expression that crossed Mr Masters' face caused her to laugh freely, and she raised her gloved hand and covered her mouth. She might have not focused on lessons of being a proper lady, but she still knew the basics.

"But that is such a powerful horse," Mr Masters exclaimed. "Certainly not a riding horse for a young lady."

Lord De Burgh chuckled as he said, "I will admit that I have been an indulgent father. Nicolette has been riding since she was very young. And when her mother passed away, it was good therapy for her."

"Ah, I can understand that," Mr Masters admitted. "That is certainly an accomplishment that most men don't even achieve."

"That is because Miss De Burgh is more of a fairy-tale creature than a proper young lady," Daniella said with a laugh, covering her mouth.

“Certainly unique,” Mr Masters agreed, a smile on his lips. Nicolette wasn’t sure yet what the man’s opinion of her might be, but she was certainly interested in discovering the truth before the night was over.

“Mr Masters, would you care to entertain us with tales of your most epic hunts?” Lord De Burgh asked.

“My word, my most epic?” Mr Masters said with a laugh. “I don’t know if I would call my hunts epic, but there are a few I’m really proud of.”

Nicolette settled back in her chair as she listened to the stories that Mr Masters was able to tell. From his enthusiasm it was clear that he was very passionate about the sport, but also very humane. He spoke of the thrill of the chase, but never pulling the trigger unless he was certain he’d have success. Then, as he described the families, he was able to help, Nicolette felt her heart opening towards the man. She was certainly thinking he was the most interesting man she had ever met.

“Dinner is served,” came the butler’s voice at the end of one of his stories, causing Nicolette to blink and come back to reality. She felt there for a while it had just been the two of them, her heart fluttering every time his eyes landed on hers.

As was customary, Mr Masters led Daniella to the dinner table because she was the eldest. Nicolette followed behind, thinking that the man looked as good from the rear as he did from the front. Since Mr Masters spent much time outdoors, his figure was rather muscular compared to the slim build of most gentlemen in town. She couldn’t help but wonder what his anatomy would look like without proper clothing. Such a thought caused Nicolette to blush as she tried desperately not to think any more of Mr Masters’ naked body.

When Nicolette sat across from Mr Masters at the table, she reasoned it was the perfect seat to which she could converse with him across the table. She enjoyed asking him about his preferred choice in horse, and soon they were discussing horse breeds and comparing the different mounts they'd had in the past.

"When was the last time you rode, Miss De Burgh?" Daniella asked at one point. The fact that her own sister was using her proper name was really starting to irritate Nicolette, but she tried not to show her frustration.

"I will admit that it has been some time," Nicolette reasoned. "The likes of a woman riding around town during the season can be perceived as rather scandalous. So, I normally wait until after the season when we retire to the countryside in the autumn to ride."

"But what a sight that would be," Daniella teased.

"Perhaps you'd like to try it with me," Nicolette retorted. When her father cleared his throat, Nicolette knew not to push the subject. She glanced towards him and saw him shake his head for a mere moment, signalling that she should refrain from bickering at the table.

Nicolette held her tongue for the most part after that, allowing the others to talk more so she wouldn't be tempted to say anything out of line. Most would say that she had an easy temper. However, when it came to her stepsister, she couldn't help but be frustrated most of the time.

Chapter 5

By the time the dinner party had come to an end, Eric was thoroughly impressed with the De Burgh family. He left thinking he'd enjoyed everyone's company. Being around the countess and her daughter helped Eric to remember some of the happiest times in his life when his father and the late duke would hunt together.

Eric was pleasantly surprised by the nature of Miss Nicolette. He had never met such a young lady in his life. Most eligible young ladies were much like Miss Daniella. They'd been taught to be proper young ladies and enjoy the same pastimes of needlework, singing and dancing. But never had he met a young lady who was interested in botany or rode such a powerful horse for pleasure.

Furthermore, Nicolette was a beautiful young lady. Her black hair reminded him of the midnight hour when the moon was thin, and light was very little. However, her eyes were a stark contrast and were a tantalising light blue. Her tanned complexion made her look other-worldly because it was very different from the norm. Overall, he found her not only extremely attractive but also very interesting to speak with.

As he rode home in his father's phaeton, he couldn't help but think of what it would feel like to kiss Miss Nicolette. Would her lips be as warm as her sun-kissed skin? Would she taste like spring from all her time in the garden? Would he smell the fresh blooms of flowers as he ran his fingers through her hair?

Eric was surprised by his body's reaction to the thought of Miss Nicolette. He had met plenty of beautiful young ladies before, yet he'd

never felt this sort of reaction before. Even Miss Daniella was a very handsome creature, yet she didn't pique his interest like Miss Nicolette did.

He could easily picture himself out in the forest with her, both of them enjoying the outing. And what he would do with her alone made him even more heated up. He'd never been with a woman out in nature and thought that would be the most pleasurable thing he'd ever done. It would perhaps be even more thrilling than the chase of the hunt.

By the time the vehicle returned to the townhouse, Eric knew that he needed to get his emotions under control. Forcing himself to be calm was a skill he'd learned over the years of hunting. Therefore, he closed his eyes and took several long deep breaths to allow his heated body to cool down.

As the door was opened for him, he stepped down promptly and walked to the front of the house. He didn't even bother waiting for the butler to answer the door as he pushed in and took care of his own needs, hanging his hat and gloves up at the front door. He walked down the hallway towards his own study, unbuttoning his dinner jacket as he went as his boots clapped against the marble floor.

When he opened his study door and found the fireplace already lit and a candelabra on his desk, he was worried that someone might have been going through his things. But as he saw his father sitting behind the desk, a glass of brandy in his hand, all he could do was smile as he settled into the wooden chair with a plush backing at his own desk.

"I'm curious to hear how your night went," his father declared. His voice was a low hum and had been for as long as Eric could remember. His hair was greying around the temples, signs of his age. And as he sat in his house robe, looking as though he was ready for

bed, Eric could see the wrinkles on his face to show that he'd lived a good, long life full of happy memories.

"I had a wonderful night, Father," Eric said as he picked up the other glass of brandy and took a small sip. "I paid respects to Lady De Burgh and her daughter and was introduced to Lord De Burgh and his own daughter."

"So, there are two young ladies in the household?" Lord Masters asked with a wink. Eric couldn't help but chuckle as he nodded his head.

"Yes, there are. And they were both lovely company," Eric admitted honestly.

"However, is there one particular lady you are more interested in than the other?" his father asked, his voice full of hopeful excitement.

"Father, please. It was only one dinner. I cannot decide the fate of my married life based on one dinner," Eric reasoned.

"I met your mother at a dinner party, and we were married a fortnight later," Lord Masters said with a shrug. He sipped his drink and looked towards the fire, seeming to remember the instance.

"Well, I like to think I have a little more time to pick and choose a bride," Eric said.

"My son, you do. However, I wouldn't want you to dally much

longer," Lord Masters said. "I believe this season would be plenty enough time to find a suitable young lady and get married."

"And the season has just begun. Therefore, I hope you will not be waiting up for me in the study every time I come back from a social outing," Eric said with a laugh, setting his glass aside. He wasn't much for drinking and left the strong drink alone for now.

"Fine, fine," Lord Masters said as he rose from the chair, taking his drink with him. "You are my only son, Eric. I have high hopes for you and wish you all the happiness in the world."

"Thank you, Father. You have always been rather loving and reasonable with me," Eric said as he stood and clasped hands with the man. "Now get some rest. Mother will not be pleased if you sleep the morning away."

"Nor will she with you," Lord Masters said with a wink. He then made his way out of the room, whistling as he went. Eric settled back down in the chair, listening to the sound of his father's whistle die off as the man made his way to his bedchamber. He was finally left alone to ponder his thoughts about the evening.

Miss Nicolette rose back into his mind's eye as he pictured her likeness. He smiled to himself, thinking it was obvious to him which one of the ladies at the De Burgh residence he was interested in. Yet, he would have to agree that his interpretation of the evening had been correct. He didn't want to base anything on just one dinner. Miss Nicolette had certainly captured his attention. But would she be able to retain it?

As Eric thought about the next action he would take in regards to Miss

Nicolette, he pondered how soon would be too soon to call upon her. And, would he want to include Miss Daniella in his plans? He was certain that his father would like him to marry Miss Daniella because her father had been close friends with him. However, the former duke had passed away in a foolish duel, rendering his family name almost unamendable.

The only thing that Eric knew for sure was that he would enjoy getting to know Miss Nicolette more than just one meeting. He wished to understand that what she said was actually true. Eric's first impressions of the young lady were pretty high, but he couldn't help but wonder if he'd always find her this interesting or if she would one day turn out to be just like every other young lady in town. Then, he might as well settle for a beautiful wife such as Miss Daniella and really appease his father.

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